Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler

At the Edge of the Forest

Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, editors

Cornell Southeast Asia Program

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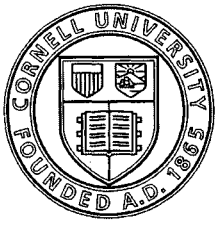

Cornell University

David Chandler at Banteay Srey, 2004

Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, editors

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Photograph of mural: Photo by Darren Campbell, reprinted with permission.

To David Chandler

David Chandler in Kompong Chhnang Province, 1961

David Chandler in Takeo Province, 1962

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of essays grew out of a panel at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting, 2001, focused on the theoretical and methodological contributions of David Chandler's essay, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts." It also grew out of more casual discussions—in Paris, Phnom Penh, DeKalb, and elsewhere—about this essay and others of David's writings, and about David's profound influence on the thinking and writing of a growing community of scholars interested in Cambodian history, religion, and culture.

A number of people have contributed ideas and encouraged the development of this volume, and we want to thank them for their support: Mark Bradley, Michael Cullinane, Kate Frieson, Christopher Goscha, Charles Hallisey, Paul Kratowska, Shawn McHale, Anthony Reid, and Kheang Un. We are also grateful for the astute and helpful comments of an anonymous reader at Cornell SEAP, and to SEAP's Deborah Homsher and Fred Conner, who have edited our work. The late May Ebihara's great friendship and regard for David helped inspire both the original panel and this volume. She would have been pleased to see the completion of this project. Ingrid Muan—whose loss we have also mourned in the course of working on this volume—and Ashley Thompson planned and obtained the cover art for this volume—as a surprise for David. The mural, exhibited at Reyum Gallery in Phnom Penh, was commissioned by Ashley Thompson for the *Hau Pralung* exhibit she curated. We thank Ingrid for commissioning Darren Campbell to photograph the mural specifically for this volume. It seems fitting somehow that, like the incomplete images of Cambodia-at-given-moments that we capture in our scholarly representations, the original mural doesn't exist anymore, except as Campbell's photo and the cover of this book.

We also want to acknowledge the work and ideas of the contributors to this collection, who have doggedly shaped and reshaped their essays through the volume's slow gestation and different incarnations, all while giving birth to quite a number of other books, essays, and a remarkable number of babies. At least as the story is remembered and told, the original draft of Penny Edward's essay for this volume was finished in a delivery room as she went into labor with her third child; Erik Davis revised his essay while awaiting the birth of his second child in Bangkok. Tony, Arun, Nahanni, Lorenza, Anna, Eva, Meridian, and Arcadia were all born as their parents worked on this collection of essays and we thank them for their patience.

And most of all, we thank David Chandler—for "Songs" and his indispensable *History of Cambodia*; for all of his books, essays, ideas, lectures, and critiques; for the indecipherable postcards we nonetheless knew were from him; the rapid-fire emails and the scrawled marginal comments; for his acuity and intellectual curiosity and poetry; for his generosity and encouragement; and for more energy in his seventies than most of us will ever have.

* * *

A slightly revised version of David Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts" is reprinted in this volume with kind permission from the Yale University Council on Southeast Asian Studies. The transliteration of spoken Khmer in this volume is based on an adaptation of the Franco-Khmer transcription system developed by Franklin E. Huffman in 1983, now widely adopted by US anthropologists and explicated in the foreword to *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, edited by Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002).

SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: 2001 AAS PANEL IN HONOR OF DAVID CHANDLER[1]

May Ebihara

It is with enormous regret that I cannot attend this Association for Asian Studies session honoring David Chandler. I feel quite crestfallen, rather like a woebegone Cinderella left sitting by the cold hearth while the rest of you are at the grand party to honor David's work and his recent retirement from Monash University. I wish that some equivalent of a fairy godmother, perhaps a Cambodian *apsara*, a celestial nymph, could swoop down and carry me off to Chicago. Alas, it is not to be. But I certainly join you in spirit to express the greatest admiration and affection for the *Mohâ-krou* Chandler. David is *the* major historian of Cambodia, and his six books and numerous articles on Cambodian history and culture constitute an exceptional contribution to Southeast Asian studies. As well, he is noted for the great generosity and good cheer with which he has always encouraged and helped students, young scholars, and colleagues.

While we identify David as an historian, that disciplinary label does not do justice to his work that goes far beyond simple accounts of historical events and figures. His writings have a richness, sophistication, and felicitous turns of phrase that reflect the broad sweep of his intelligence, far-ranging curiosity, breadth of readings, interest in numerous fields, and—a quality particularly endearing to anthropologists—his constant awareness of social and cultural settings, the "real world," within which people must wend their way. Some sense of these qualities can be gleaned from David's "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," a relatively early work, written in 1978, that has become a classic in Khmer studies and serves as the inspiration for this panel. It also happens to be David's personal favorite among his various papers for its "use [of] literature to gain access to the thought world of Khmer and thereby ... heighten our

[1] These comments are excerpted from May Ebihara's introduction to a 2001 panel honoring David Chandler on the occasion of his retirement from Monash University. Anthropologist of Cambodia and long-time friend and colleague of David Chandler, Ebihara passed away in 2005. Since she was too ill to complete her tribute to Chandler for this volume, we have included these comments, which formed the kernel of her planned foreword.

understanding of Cambodia's past."[2] David's "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" explores precolonial Khmer perceptions of moral and social order through discussion of three literary works: a Cambodian folktale about three young sisters who, abandoned in the forest by their heedless mother, gradually turn into birds; another tale about a crocodile that is deeply devoted to a Buddhist abbot but ends up unwittingly killing him; and, finally, a verse chronicle about the vicissitudes of a nineteenth-century Cambodian family and their building of a Buddhist *wat* in memory of a dead son. From the folktales and poetry, David draws insights into Khmer conceptions of proper behavior and proper social arrangements and hierarchy, and the ambiguities of such notions. He also asks how people deal with the tensions, gaps, and overlaps between things as they are and things as they ought to be, as well as other contrasts, such as order versus disorder, villages/cultivation versus wilderness/forest, humans versus nonhumans, and the sometimes blurred margins between them.

David's far-ranging influence on young scholars in a number of fields from different schools is certainly evident in this session's wonderful array of young scholars with PhDs in history, anthropology, and religion. All are now actively conducting research on various topics, and it is enormously gratifying to older Cambodia specialists such as David and me to see that the future of Cambodia studies is in such able hands.

Anne Hansen, the organizer of this session, noted in the abstract for this panel that "Songs ..." raised "significant substantive and methodological issues concerning narrative, morality, suffering, and problems of meaning," with the use of literary and other texts offering a fruitful approach for dealing with "the dearth of resources for understanding Cambodia." The papers to be presented are, in her words, "woven around the three themes articulated in Chandler's article: the use of narratives to understand problems of suffering and moral order; the relationship between ideals and praxis; and the ambiguities and tensions of borders between historical periods, countries, ideologies, forms of discourse, and people." It is certainly testimony to David's intellectual keenness that the questions and contrasts he raised in his analysis of precolonial times still have resonance for trying to understand modern Cambodia.

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[2] David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 43–44.

AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST: NARRATIVE, ORDER, AND QUESTIONS OF MEANING IN KHMER HISTORY AND SOCIETY

Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood

Umberto Eco opened his 1994 Norton lectures, at Harvard, with the image of woods "as a metaphor for the narrative text, not only for the text of fairy tales but for any narrative text."[1] In Eco's lectures, the forest becomes a space in which authors and readers can wander and linger or pass quickly through. In contrast to the "actual world," he suggested, fictional woods and worlds "... allow us to concentrate on a finite, enclosed world ... Since we cannot wander outside its boundaries, we are led to explore it in depth." Yet wandering in the forest does not mean suspending our knowledge of reality. Rather, we have to "know a lot of things about the actual world" in order to interpret narrative.[2] Reading fiction, in Eco's words, is thus a means

> ... by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world.
>
> This is the consoling function of narrative—the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time. And it has always been the paramount function of myth: to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience.[3]

This volume is concerned with narrative and consoling myths, and with forests, real and imagined. Theoretically, however, it is situated not inside the metaphorical woods but rather at the forest's edge, in the netherland of trees, shadows, fields,

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[1] Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 6.

[2] Ibid., p. 85.

[3] Ibid., p. 87.

houses, people, animals, spirits, and memories, where myths and scholarship run alongside each other, crisscross, and sometimes overlap, the space and time of "songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on, ... *entre chien et loup*," as historian David Chandler has phrased it. The image of forest's edge underlying this volume comes from Chandler's most provocative and influential historical essay, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts" (reprinted in this volume). The essays collected here are concerned with Cambodia's history, culture, and religion, and how their study has been conveyed through Chandler's ideas and work. In particular, these essays build on the theoretical and methodological contributions of "Songs" to explore the boundaries and twisting paths between narrative and history: in other words, what constitutes "story" and how it might serve as a scholarly source. These essays also query historical and contemporary responses to the kind of moral problems that Chandler's 1978 essay examined from a narrative perspective, the problems of order and disorder and the disjuncture between what should apparently happen and what actually does. Finally, thinking through and with "Songs," as well as some of Chandler's other work, the authors included here reflect on the ideas and methods passed from one generation of scholars to another, the songs at nightfall transmitted through teaching, fieldwork, archival research, translation, and study.

Coming to Cambodia first as a US Department of State attaché, and then as a student of Khmer culture, history, and language, Chandler crafted the postcolonial field of Khmer Studies, and his work has had a profound influence on subsequent generations of scholars of Cambodia. His career has spanned the Sihanouk reign, the Vietnam War, the brief Lon Nol interval, the Khmer Rouge period, and the successive socialist and postsocialist governments since. But his historical work has spanned an even longer period; it was Chandler who devised the first, and to this date only, systematic history in English (and now also in Khmer) of the Khmer region. Following the completion of a still widely cited 1974 dissertation from the University of Michigan, "Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1848," many of his first scholarly works were centered on the early modern period, the precolonial history of Cambodia, in which he explored Khmer political relationships as well as the ways in which Cambodians themselves inscribed and gave meaning to their own concepts of power and history.[4]

One of Chandler's most defining contributions to the field of Khmer studies is evident even in these early works. As Penny Edwards suggests in her essay in this volume, Chandler's "particular gift as a historian" has been his "embrace and acute analysis of a broad range of materials, long before it was fashionable to mobilize multiple media in the interests of scholarly research." His innovative use of unusual sources for constructing Khmer history encompassed treatments of geographical toponyms, folktales, Buddhist poetry, and accounts of merit-making ceremonies. Standing alongside his use of more "standard" historical documents, including inscriptions and diplomatic letters, Chandler's use of such sources projects a distinctive historical voice into his work, one that is ultimately concerned with engaging the humanity of the historical subject and of representing—as much as is accurately possible—the emotions and experiences of his subjects. As Thompson

[4] David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); and David Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1848" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974).

beautifully observes in her essay about this quality in Chandler's work of "capturing emotion in history,"

> ... unlike the soldier in the battlefield, emotion cannot be captured in any straightforward manner. It is the uncapturable that is captured here, like a photograph of perfume—the intangible but ever so real.

Chandler's most lyrical and widely appreciated work of history, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," serves as a central reference point for all the works in this volume. An analysis of narrative and chronicle sources used for understanding the emotional experience of loss and warfare in the nineteenth century in precolonial Khmer society, this work contains methodological and theoretical insights that have had an enormous impact on students of Khmer culture. Written in 1978, on the eve of the Vietnamese defeat of the Khmer Rouge but before the extent of the Khmer Rouge atrocities were widely known, when Chandler himself was prevented by war and politics from returning to Cambodia, "Songs" is an attempt to write history that is about emotions as well as events. It reveals the history and feel of specific nineteenth-century circumstances in Cambodia while simultaneously asking the kind of larger questions that no one can ever clearly answer—about the perplexing nature of violence and disorder. Perhaps because of the ambiguities of the subject, Chandler seems to have drawn more self-consciously than usual on the other part of his life as a poet; the clarity and beauty of his writing in "Songs" has also been a part of its influence on subsequent scholarship.[5]

With its use of innovative sources, its distinctive historical approach, and fluid literary style, "Songs" exemplifies many of Chandler's most important contributions to the study of Cambodia. The first of these legacies is Chandler's insistence on carefully representing indigenous voices. Evident in his other work from this period (and later) as well, this approach was methodologically "edgy" at the time, part of a wave of new work by young postcolonial scholars who were moving away from the paradigm of Indianization as their framework for writing Southeast Asian histories and toward a recognition, appreciation, and skillful interpretation of indigenous sources. While current scholarship has in many ways returned to wider regional and even global lenses for viewing the cultural and historical contours of Southeast Asia, this work rests on the foundation of knowledge detailed in the path-breaking "autonomous histories" and "thick descriptions" of newly independent Southeast Asian nation-states and individual Southeast Asian villages that appeared in the 1960s and 70s, written by Chandler and others of his generation.[6]

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[5] Since Chandler seriously returned to poetry writing in 2000, his poems have appeared regularly in the Australian literary magazine *Quadrant*; another is forthcoming in the US literary journal *SubTropic*.

[6] Laurie J. Sears, *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John R. W. Smail* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); Clifford Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972).

Chandler's work on colonial society, as well as on earlier periods of Khmer history, led to the publication of his well-known *The History of Cambodia,* in 1983,[7] and *The Khmers,* co-authored with Ian Mabbett, in 1995.[8] His colonial-period writings further develop his interest in Khmer conceptions and the workings of power relationships in Khmer society. Yet, "until recently," Chandler has reminded us, the contemporary notion of "society" was absent in Cambodia. Society was "seen in familial, authoritarian terms rather than in terms of voluntary, supposedly "horizontal" associations."[9] Chandler's caution about the unreflective use of analytical categories for examining Khmer history that are incongruent with Khmer thinking is another of the ways in which his scholarship has strongly influenced the field. This trait also helps to explain the appeal of Chandler's own writings across disciplines, to scholars approaching problems in Khmer culture from a variety of perspectives. In this sense, Chandler is himself influenced by Paul Mus, whom he greatly admired and with whom he studied at Yale. Chandler (with Ian Mabbett) wrote that Mus's work on Indochinese cults showed how religious ideas and practices were symbolically interwoven to "bridge the gap" between local and translocal conceptions of authority. While Mus analyzed the cults in terms of their "marriage" of Indian and indigenous forms and ideologies, Chandler and Mabbett asserted that Mus was sensitive to the problems of historical representation posed by this claim:

> We are probably entitled to think that people like the Chams thought of the relationship between Indian and local in their culture in rather the same way ... For them, their culture was a whole. From one point of view, we can regard it as wholly Indian; from another, as wholly local. It may seem to us most rational as well as most moderate to say that it was a mixture of the two, but in a sense it may be also most false. For the Chams, their culture was unique; they did not use our categories of thought. Any student of the history of Asian societies is constantly running up against such paradoxes, or mysticisms. It is certainly necessary for us to resolve and to analyse; but it is also necessary to recognize that the paradoxes as such may be important in the psychology, and therefore the history, of the communities with which we are concerned, and we must be ready to respond to them as they are.[10]

Like Mus's, Chandler's work exhibits an engagement with classic scholarly paradigms for the study of Southeast Asian culture, yet, at the same time, a continual questioning of them by virtue of an acute sensitivity, even before Foucaultian-influenced scholarship became *de rigueur,* to how much historiographical poetics and preoccupations alter the representation of historical events. Chandler's awareness of

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[7] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* and revised editions, 1992, 1996, and 2000.

[8] Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

[9] David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 78 fn. 5, and pp. 304–305; David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* pp. 104–08.

[10] Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, "Introduction," in Paul Mus, *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa,* trans. Ian Mabbett, ed. Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 3 (Monash: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1975), pp. xi-xii.

his own shifting historical sensibilities, for example, emerges in the multiple drafts and versions of his essays "The Tragedy of Cambodian History" and "The Tragedy of Cambodian History Revisited."[11] In the first of these two essays, Chandler traces out five historical factors that he believes contributed to the ongoing dimensions of "tragedy" in Cambodian history: Cambodia's geopolitical location; its colonial experience; its "ethnic singularity"; the kinds (and conceptions) of leaders ruling it; and religiopolitical ideologies blending power, status, and merit.[12] Revisiting these "five factors" in a more politically optimistic prognosis in 1994, and then again in a less hopeful assessment later that same year, Chandler confesses that his experiences with the *realpolitik* of observing Cambodia over many years had shifted his historical perceptions:

> Between 1990 and 1993 I visited Cambodia six times ... I came to Cambodia prepared to find elements of tragedy closely linked to the country's recent past. I found some, as I expected, when I visited the Khmer Rouge interrogation facility and the prison in Phnom Penh ... known in the Pol Pot era by the code name S-21 ... Here, I kept telling myself, was runaway power, unchecked violence, meaningless malignity.
>
> If S-21 held few surprises, I found unexpected elements of tragedy when I revisited Angkor for the first time in thirty years ... In the 1960s, when I had visited Angkor many times, Cambodia was in a seemingly charming, postheroic phase of its history; the ruins were beautiful reminders of past "greatness," contrasted to the country's powerless, but mesmerizing "charm." When I returned to Siem Reap in 1992, I was struck not only with how much beauty the monuments conveyed, but also how so many of them, and Angkor Wat in particular, could also be read as expressions of unchecked power and control ... Wandering inside the temple and marveling at its grandeur increased my sense of powerlessness. This effect had been intended when it was built, and the ratio of builder to visitor remained in force.[13]

Chandler's attentiveness to indigenous voices seems to have led him to the recognition that scholarly models were just that and not always compatible with life itself, which can prove considerably more difficult to comprehend. Like myths and stories, scholarly models are an effort to establish orderliness where it may not, in fact, exist. "Myths, whatever else they may do," Chandler and Mabbett wrote, "are there to reconcile" and to make communal life seem whole and possible; "reality," on the other hand, "with its political tensions and multiple cultural influences, is heterogeneous and divergent."[14] It is this scholarly and ethical perspective, insistent on hearing and seeing the larger human meanings conveyed through local and indigenous voices, narrated in a historical voice, that has given recent scholarship in the field of Khmer Studies some of its most original and distinctive agendas. In particular, Ashley Thompson's essay in this volume examines the implications of this

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[11] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 295–325.

[12] Ibid., pp. 298–304.

[13] Ibid., pp. 319–20.

[14] Mabbett and Chandler, "Introduction" to *India Seen from the East*, p. xi.

historiographical approach—which she names "engendering history"—as part of a scholarly inheritance from Mus via Chandler that likewise animates her own new work.

Chandler's work, as we have suggested, also embodies a kind of history-writing that takes on questions that are not specifically historical, questions that reach well beyond apprehending particular historical moments and toward human experience writ large. It is in this respect that the "Songs" essay has had an enduring impact on recent students of Cambodia, many of whom have been trying—since 1979—to unravel the chains of cultural and historical circumstances and ideas that led Cambodians to the misery of the Khmer Rouge regime and its aftermath. Umberto Eco has suggested that fictional woods grant the freedom to a reader or writer to "trace his or her own path, deciding to go to the left or to the right of a certain tree and making a choice at every tree encountered."[15] Yet while that condition of choosing one's path may hold true in the fictional woods, the "actual world" does not always grant people clear choices, and sometimes none at all. One of the themes of Chandler's "Songs" is an effort to examine how various conceptions of order and disorder revealed in narrative contrast with the ways in which real people—not readers and authors—have to live. In the actual world, people—like those in war-torn nineteenth-century Cambodia or living under the Nazi or Pol Pot regimes—must respond to choices that are not really choices, what Lawrence Langer has described as the "choiceless choice" recounted in the testimonies of Holocaust survivors.[16] Survivor testimonies, chronicles, and folktales can all provide accounts of reality that are not easy to interpret or even to hear. In "Songs," Chandler explores the tension between what is experienced or lived and yet not understandable, and what can be told and explained about it that was not ever lived.

"Songs" is the touchstone for the essays in this volume, regardless of period or disciplinary approach, and for their contributions to theorizing narrative as a historical and cultural source. The narrative archive considered in this volume includes the more conventional forms we are accustomed to thinking of as narrative, such as stories and chronicles, as well as other kinds of innovative sources with narrative structures, including possession, memories, landscape design, religious buildings, murals, political theater, torture confessions, and medical prognoses. These essays draw on, respond to, and, in some cases, amplify the methods and theoretical aims of "Songs," as well as its thematic focus on understanding the tensions between idealized and actual conceptions of order and disorder.

If Chandler's work has spanned the decades stretching from the birth of national studies of Cambodia to the voids and question marks of the 1970s, when "Songs" was written, and, more recently, the rebirth of postrevolutionary Khmer cultural studies, this trajectory is not as linear as it might, from the outside, appear. Contemplating the recent scholarly representation of Cambodia sends us running back to Eco's tangled imagery of woods, and to that strange liminal space at the edge of the forest between myth and reality and representation and actual world, where

[15] Eco, *Six Walks*, p. 6.

[16] Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 26.

an apparently straight path turns out to be one that wraps back and around on itself. After 1979, the direction of Chandler's work, which had been focused on the difficult task of reading and representing historical sources from the nineteenth century and before, became absorbed with making sense of the DK (Democratic Kampuchea) regime. The interpretive path Chandler had been trodding before this turn was now densely shadowed by the aftermath of war and the politically and emotionally charged questions of genocide, superpower foreign policy, and the psychology and banality of violence and brutality. Since it was written right at the turn of the path, part of the salience and appeal of "Songs" is its treatment of nineteenth-century perceptions of order and violence in a manner that anticipates the complex interpretive tensions connected with understanding the DK period.

Since the end of the DK period in 1979, scholarship on Cambodia has been characterized—at first—by a justifiable confusion about what empirically happened between 1975 and 1979, and, later, by a more ongoing moral and interpretive dilemma concerning how and whether to judge or analyze, and how to write about, these questions. This confusion was compounded by the trauma of memory and the reality that the consoling stories that people tell to order their own narratives of trauma cannot always be their own stories.[17] Yet even as the facts about the DK years were being assembled, it became apparent that to begin to understand Cambodia's genocide required rethinking the past and its interpretation as well as the present. It also raised complex problems concerning the aims and methods of interpretation itself; this issue is evident, for example, in scholarly writings concerned with exhibiting images of Tuol Sleng atrocities.[18]

In the preface to the 1994 volume *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, Chandler pointed to the irony that "the revival, or more properly the birth, of twentieth-century Cambodian cultural studies ... was a product of those nightmarish years" stretching from the latter part of the Vietnamese-American War that had engulfed Cambodia by 1970 through the DK regime and ending with the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979.[19] The worldwide attention generated by the violent cultural revolution of the Khmer Rouge and the deaths by execution, starvation, and sickness of close to two million Khmer—which too closely and frighteningly invoked the death camps of the Holocaust—led to an agonized appraisal in the international community of what had gone wrong in Cambodia.

The first wave of new work on Cambodia focused on reconstructing exactly what had happened between 1970 and 1979, based on the still limited sources available at the time. It moved from William Shawcross's widely read *Sideshow* in 1979, which viewed Cambodia within the context of US foreign policy in Vietnam, to

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[17] Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravada Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24,2 (1996): 305–28; Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982* (Boston, MA: South End, 1984).

[18] Rachael Hughes, "The Abject Artifacts of Memory: Photographs from Cambodia's Genocide," *Media, Culture, and Society* 25,1 (2003): 23–44; Lindsay C. French, "Exhibiting Terror," in *Representing Truth Claims*, ed. Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 131–55; David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Judy Ledgerwood, "The Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narratives," *Museum Anthropology* 21,1 (1997): 82–98.

[19] May Ebihara, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood, eds., *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. xi.

subsequent studies by Michael Vickery, Ben Kiernan, Nayan Chanda, Elizabeth Becker, and David Chandler, which traced the origins of the communist party in Cambodia and the rise of Pol Pot, analyzing recent Cambodian history largely through the international and national frames of Cold War relations and nationalism.[20] The scholarly absorptions of this period focused on questions of how colonialism, World War II, postwar efforts by the French to reexert colonial authority in Indochina, and the rise of nationalism gave way to a postcolonial political landscape dominated by the dynamics of the Cold War. This history, the resulting war in Vietnam, and that war's impact in Cambodia were all interpreted as crucial factors in what Chandler termed the Cambodian "tragedy."[21] Internally, scholars also began to examine Sihanouk's attempts to maintain social equilibrium by playing the various political factions outside and within Khmer society against each other; divisions between the small comfortable elite and the rural peasantry; and the ways in which the personalities of individual actors contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

Many Khmer survivors were themselves trying to articulate what had happened within the context of their own lives, and to alert the world to the continuing dimensions of the tragedy; among the most influential of these narratives were memoirs by Haing Ngor, Pin Yathay, and Teeda Butt Mam, all published in 1987.[22] The 1984 film *The Killing Fields*, which told the story of *New York Times* reporter Sidney Schanberg and his assistant, Dith Pran (played in the movie by Haing Ngor), moved Western audiences to ask for more analysis of how what became in popular parlance "the killing fields" could ever have come about.[23]

While most of the historical, political, and journalistic treatments of Cambodia written during the 1980s were focused on the monumental documentary task of understanding exactly what had occurred in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979—to whom, where, and when—a satisfactory accounting of "why" proved more elusive. Chandler turned to a closer consideration of this problem with the publication of his 1991 *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945*. Tracing the historical antecedents of the Khmer Rouge period to the aftermath of World War II, he argued for the importance of focusing greater scrutiny on internal factors within Khmer society and history for understanding Democratic Kampuchea. While Chandler's work shifted attention to Khmer antecedents for the disastrous policies of the DK regime, historians were still divided over the issue of whether and how extremists or mad men within the communist party in Cambodia had "hijacked" the revolution. This question led Chandler to biographical research on the life of Pol Pot, resulting in his 1992 book, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, which

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[20] William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982;* Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power* (London: Verso, 1985); Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1986); Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986); David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1991); and David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

[21] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodia Past*, pp. 295, 297.

[22] Haing Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1987); Pin Yathay, *Stay Alive My Son* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1987); Joan Criddle and Teeda Butt Mam, *To Destroy You is No Loss: The Odyssey of a Cambodian Family* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

[23] *The Killing Fields*, film, directed by Roland Joffé, Warner Home Videos, Burbank, CA, 1984.

placed Pol Pot "inside his own Cambodian context and inside a wider set of influences from abroad."[24] Continuing analysis of this question also animated Ben Kiernan's 1996 argument that racial hatreds lay at the root of the DK disaster and Alex Hinton's 2005 study of the psychological underpinnings of violence in Khmer cultural conceptions.[25] From his biography of Pol Pot, Chandler himself turned to an even more complex dimension of explaining the inexplicable, a study of S-21 (more commonly known as Tuol Sleng), the DK prison-turned-museum that has become, in contemporary Cambodia, one of the central sites for constructing national narratives of DK horrors. In a painstaking and painfully detailed analysis of how the prison worked as a "total institution" in the lives of its victims and perpetrators, Chandler used this lens to explore how the DK regime conceived of the world, of "others," and of themselves, revealing the regime at its worst and thus perhaps also with the utmost clarity. His examination of the banality and routinization of torture and violence at Tuol Sleng, woven together with his comparative treatment of similar atrocities in Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, North Vietnam, and Argentina, forces us to remember that "as a twentieth-century phenomenon, S-21 was by no means unique."[26] Rather,

> Explanations for S-21 that place the blame for evil entirely on "evil people," which is to say on others, fail to consider that what all of us share with perpetrators of evil is not a culture, a doctrine, or an innate tendency to kill but our similarity as human beings and, in particular, our tendencies toward acculturation and obedience.[27]

If political histories of the Khmer Rouge period dominated the research agenda of much of the eighties, the birthing of Khmer cultural studies followed in the 1990s, in the wake of the movements of traumatized Khmer refugees from the Thai-Khmer border who fled to host countries like the US, France, and Australia. The Khmer diaspora generated a rush of new work by young scholars encountering survivors of the Pol Pot regime in border camps in Thailand, in health clinics in Dallas, and newly opened Buddhist temples in Paris.[28] The 1994 volume, *Cambodian Culture since 1975,*

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[24] Chandler, *Brother Number One*, p. 4.

[25] Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did they Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

[26] David Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, p. 144.

[27] Ibid., pp. 154–55.

[28] For example, see Carol A. Mortland and Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Refugee Resource Acquisition: The Invisible Communication System," in *Cross Cultural Adaptation: Current Approaches*, ed. Young Tun Kim and W. B. Gudykunst (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985); John L. Marcucci, "Khmer Refugees in Dallas: Medical Decisions in the Context of Pluralism" (PhD dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1986); Richard F. Mollica, Grace Wyshak, and James Lavelle, "The Psychological Impact of War Trauma and Torture on Southeast Asian Refugees," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144,12 (1987): 1,567–72; Frank Smith, *Interpretive Accounts of the Khmer Rouge Years: Personal Experience in Khmer Peasant Worldview* (Madison, WI: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1989); Usha Welaratna, *Beyond the Killing Fields: Voices of Nine Cambodian Survivors in America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Lindsay C. French, "Enduring Holocaust, Surviving History: Displaced Cambodians on the Thai-Cambodian Border, 1989–1991" (PhD dissertation,

that Chandler hailed as representing the "birth" of cultural studies for the field was, unsurprisingly, focused on cultural transition and revival in Khmer communities scattered across the globe. The tone of research on Khmer studies in this period was in fact set by the theme of "salvage ethnography," akin to that done by Franz Boas and his students with Native American communities early in the twentieth century, when these scholars sought to record the knowledge of the "old ways" from elders before they died. Cambodia had been devastated by the Khmer Rouge and warfare, and thus the question that motivated many scholars working together with members of diasporic communities was focused on what remnants of Cambodian culture could be saved.

Since 1994, scholars from a variety of disciplines have returned to viewing Khmer life in different registers than the pressing and traumatic events of the 1970s permitted, while, at the same time, finding that both contemporary and historical events require rethinking in light of the Cambodian tragedy. Contemporary events cannot be understood without reference to the recent past; recent historical events take on new meaning in light of what followed. On a practical scholarly level, the challenge of locating sources for Khmer history, which was always difficult, has become even more problematic. The loss of Khmer artists and scholars and the rich intellectual culture they had created was one of the tragic outcomes of the Khmer Rouge regime. Sources such as manuscripts, temple murals, books, artifacts, and documents were also destroyed to a large degree. For the history of the Khmer Rouge period itself, the documents left behind are fraught with troubling interpretive problems. How does one respond to oral accounts of loss and violence or analyze largely fictional confessions extracted during torture? How does one begin to connect new scholarship and contemporary events to the prerevolutionary past?

Chandler's "Songs" gave a new generation methodological and theoretical tools for trying to document and think with Khmer ways of interpreting Khmer experience. The scholars writing for this volume also draw on his other important works, including the books *History of Cambodia* and *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison,* and his essays "Maps for the Ancestors: Sacralized Topography and Echoes of Angkor in Two Cambodian Texts" and "Going Through the Motions: Ritual Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia (1848–1860)."[29] The cross-disciplinary nature of the essays in this volume contributed by historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion speaks to the continued influence of "Songs" for the questions that concern their authors: how did the past lead to and shape this particular historical moment (whether it be the Khmer Rouge period or the violence of nineteenth-century warfare)? How can this historical event be understood and represented as one that is both historically "true" and meaningfully human? How does one write about peoples' experiences of suffering and change without reifying them, creating rigid characterizations of people who suffer timelessly and do not change?

Taken together, the essays in this volume make several major contributions to the study of Khmer history and society. First, inspired by and celebrating the

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Harvard University, 1994); Toni Shapiro, "Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia" (PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1994); Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

[29] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past,* pp. 25–42, 100–118.

methods and themes evident in Chandler's "Songs," they employ a wide-ranging and varied narrative archive to analyze Khmer history and culture from the perspective of postcolonial, post-Cold War, and post-DK issues, questions, and approaches. Second, they explore questions of scholarship, subjectivity, and emotion in the representation of history, especially—though not always explicitly—as engendered by Khmer experiences of violence and turmoil during the past several decades. Third, the volume is thematically concerned with narrative, order, and the reordering of meaning, especially in response to social chaos. In this sense, the essays offer new perspectives on issues that have animated scholarly discussions of Southeast Asian societies for the last six or seven decades: how hierarchies and patron networks are constituted and changed; how and whether we should represent something we have come to refer to and understand as a diverse yet unified Southeast Asian "thought world"; and how the religious ideas of Buddhists have figured in and reconfigured this thought world.

Drawing on the themes of narrative, order, and the reconstitution of meaning, the essays in this volume also contribute new theorizing on narrative from the perspective of scholars using an array of narrative sources for understanding Khmer culture and history. In this respect, the shared insights that emerge include a methodological focus on tracing out the cultural contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes that the narrative form permits and perhaps even amplifies, and which—for the contributors to this volume—serve as productive sites for analyzing Khmer self-understanding and representation. For example, through his ethnographic account of a building project's self-reflexive bas-relief depiction of its own genesis, Marston examines the paradoxes inherent in the merit-making aims of the building project, which are simultaneously hierarchical and egalitarian, collective and individual, ancient and modern.

The essays as a whole are careful to emphasize that, although they are examining representations of shared thought worlds, they need to be seen as diverse and changing, not reified or static. This is the subject of Ledgerwood's essay, for example, in which she views the reemergence and reinterpretation of interlinking tropes of righteous leadership, power, and order in the political theater of a 1990 water festival. Narrative serves as an archive that permits "alternative readings of the past," in Edwards's words, or a way of "engendering history," in Thompson's. In this connection, it is also a way of allowing "emotion" in history—the legacy of Chandler that Thompson locates in the intellectual genealogy of Paul Mus's advice to Chandler and his classmates at Yale, "to reach out to Asia and touch it with the tips of your fingers."

Finally, drawing on Khmer evidence, the essays theorize about narrative, asking what it is about the narrative form that permits it to serve or be used as a way of reconstructing order and meaning, and what (in Eco's words) permits it to "console" and to express the inexpressible. Chandler's essay explores the ways in which Khmer narratives attempt to fill in "gaps in the world," by which he means to invoke "problems of meaning" that cannot be satisfactorily resolved. These gaps in the world include the experiences of violence, suffering, loss, grief, disorder, and trauma that figure prominently in many of the essays in this volume.

Using Chandler's "Songs" essay as a conceptual and methodological starting point, Part I of this volume, entitled "Gaps in the World," takes up that last question about how narrative helps to explain the inexplicable. The two essays by Anne Hansen and Alex Hinton included here grapple with the "consoling" function of

narrative, exploring why and how fictional stories can help us to address "gaps in the world." Hansen's reading of Khmer Buddhist essays about violence, its generation and cessation, and Hinton's use of the fictional tale of *Tum Teav* to help read and analyze the fictionalized confessions composed by victims of all-too-real torture in the unimaginable setting of Tuol Sleng prison, are both concerned not only with problems of meaning but also with the problems of writing about the problems of meaning.

Drawing on the theoretical insights of Chandler's "Songs" as a way to write the kind of history that enables us to see and appreciate peoples' "... attempts to survive inside the framework of what occasionally went on," Hansen, a historian of religion, considers the validity of Buddhist narratives as a historical archive with documentary and efficacious aspects in her essay, "Gaps in the World: Harm and Violence in Khmer Buddhist Narrative."[30] Beyond documenting historical moments of the "out-of-control experience of violence," the two narrative archival sources that Hansen examines—a nineteenth-century millenarian account of violence and purification in human history, and a cycle of stories about harm and violence from a 1920s Khmer ethical manual—were presumably not intended by their authors to serve as documentary "archives" nor as means of demonstrating "how Buddhists have analyzed abstruse causes" (two of the purposes for which Hansen uses the stories). Rather they were intended for other, more efficacious purposes: to "recall order through chaos, offer prescriptions for individual and collective morality, purify behavior, and reorient human history toward the Dhamma [teachings of the Buddha]."

The narrative ethical analyses of violence and order in Hansen's work overlap closely with anthropologist Alex Hinton's essay "Songs at the Edge of Democratic Kampuchea," in which he insightfully applies Chandler's method of using Khmer narratives to examine issues of moral order as a way to understand something of the nature of violence during the Khmer Rouge period and particularly the Tuol Sleng confessions. In his essay, Hinton draws not only on Chandler's *Voices from S-21* but also on the "Songs" article to read the "tension between order and disorder—which encompasses the fluctuation between states of meaning and meaninglessness, purity and contamination, and clarity and blindness." In this way, he examines the nature of violence in Tuol Sleng and in the regime itself. Drawing on one of the best-known of all Khmer narratives, *Tum Teav*, Hinton analyzes the actions and tropes of order and disorder in the story in connection with their Buddhist antecedents, suggesting the ways in which the story reveals "an idealized vision of a properly ordered society ... juxtaposed against the real world, where characters stumble and make terrible mistakles, leading to violence and disruption." Reading Khmer Rouge radio broadcasts through the lens of the same Buddhist notions of purity, ignorance, and mindfulness evident in the *Tum Teav* story, Hinton offers an interpretation of DK violence and how it particularly manifested itself at Tuol Sleng.

Part Two of the volume, "Alternative Readings of the Past," consists of three wide-ranging essays that represent new historical perspectives on and approaches to understanding Cambodian history. In different ways, all three of the essays question

[30] Anne Hansen in this volume, citing David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), p. 71.

older rubrics for Cambodian history. Ashley Thompson, Sokhieng Au, and Penny Edwards call on us to examine Khmer history more broadly, from outside the borders of our usual conceptual boundaries. Thompson, Au, and Edwards treat quite different periods and topics. Thompson discusses late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century inscriptions about a queen's summoning of her husband through mediumship and other forms of spiritual prowess, and how they relate to memories of the DK period and possession stories from the past and present. Au deals with the accommodations between French and Khmer representations of leprosy in colonial medicine. Edwards analyzes the place of twentieth-century representations of landscape in the rise of Khmer nationalism and identity. Yet all three authors cross boundaries, challenging our usual expectations about what kinds of sources we can use and what kinds of assumptions we can draw from them. All three want to examine Khmer history through a wider disciplinary perspective that moves the significance of particular moments in Khmer history beyond Cambodia and area studies and into the larger theoretical consideration of gender, memory, medicine, modernity, and comparative colonialisms.

Challenging and innovative in its analysis of possession narratives as historical sources, Ashley Thompson's essay, "Performative Realities: Nobody's Possession," takes up the paradox acknowledged in the scholarly refrain that women in Southeast Asia have "relatively high status," while, at the same time, few female voices are discovered in its histories. Tracing her own intellectual genealogies of work on gender relationships and possession through both Mus and Chandler, Thompson suggests how their questioning of the colonial paradigm of an Indianized Southeast Asia and their emphasis on "the mysterious and exhilarating domain of *feeling*" opened up for her "new possibilities for engendering Southeast Asian history." Her essay argues for viewing possession as "an indigenous way of making history: history in the broadest sense, as a social locus for communal memory and forgetting. ... a representation and interpretation of past events that itself constitutes an event to be interpreted in turn, a process of unearthing archives that produces an additional archive." Reading (and rereading) multiple cases of possession in the DK period and after, through oral accounts, and, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, through inscriptions, Thompson explores how possession can "make things happen," how it can make history in the sense that it causes changes and transformations not only in individuals' lives, but also in larger communal and political ways, how it offers a form of resistance to political violence, and gives voices to those who have died or who are usually silent. The process of engendering histories, she suggests, does not simply "reerect" older historical interpretations by shifting women's voices to the forefront. Rather, it "widens and deepens" our historical perspectives and understandings, allowing us to bring out "the universal implications of irreducible cultural singularity" that she finds inspiring in the writings of Mus and Chandler.

Through a comparison of contrasting representations of lepers in different types of colonial-era narratives, in "The King with Hansen's Disease: Tales of the Leper in Colonial Cambodia," Sokhieng Au charts the divergences, shifts, and syntheses that occurred in Khmer and French social and medical prognoses and treatments of leprosy as a result of colonial interventions in Cambodia. On a theoretical level, her essay also examines how narrative addresses and constructs meaning; she contends that stories portraying a certain vision of social order simultaneously represent and recreate it, since narrative in general functions to "both constitute and reflect human experience." The narratives she records and analyzes reveal the boundaries and

interactions between thought worlds and real bodies (especially men and women, diseased and healthy) at different moments in the colonial world. But importantly, Au's narrative work on the figure of the leper identifies new historical sources for understanding the construction of meaning in colonial societies and also helps us move beyond a simple binary reading of colonial history in the dichotomized terms of colonizer/colonized. Different lexicons of meaning (found, for example, in a range of biomedical, Buddhist, Christian, French, and Khmer literary works) suggest the multiplicity not only of different interpretive options available for actors to construct meaning in the colonial world, but also the possibility that one individual—"the anticlerical French doctor" who had, in spite of himself, "internalized" images of the Biblical leper, or the "Khmer man trained as a western doctor" who believed simultaneously in germ theory and moral lapses as explanations for the causation of the disease—could inhabit more than one thought world at a time. And it was "just so" with the image of a leper, who could exist as a character in more than one story at a time. Au's reading of leper stories reflects back on the work of representing "others" in the narratives that historians construct. Just as (in Au's essay) leper stories can be seen to be "about leprosy" with the "disease itself ... [remaining] a secondary focus of these narratives" while their colonial authors appropriate these stories "to legitimate specific professional agendas," historians, too, write narratives that appropriate and construct representations of others that act as they want them to. Like Chandler's, Au's methodology of exploring multiple, intersecting, and sometimes conflicting "alternative readings of the past" tries to uncover and highlight, rather than whitewash, the messiness and shifting boundaries of meaning amid the cultural flux of the early twentieth century in Cambodia.

In her lush essay, "Between a Song and a *Prei*: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest," Penny Edwards is also concerned with new tellings of history and new sources for understanding Khmer perceptions and movements. Like Thompson and Au, and like Chandler in "Songs" and "Maps for the Ancestors," Edwards wants to examine "indigenous narratives of Khmer history," but her reading of these sources is undertaken through a comparative lens that lets us focus on larger human concerns. She draws on the Khmer story studied by Chandler, *"Reuang Damnoek Kaun Lok"* (The Story of the Origin of the Child-of-the-World Bird) to analyze the tensions between European and Khmer conceptions of space, landscape, and territory as they change from the nineteenth century into the era of independence and through the DK period. Her essay carefully avoids presenting Cambodian conceptions of the forest (*prei*) as reified "traditional" views that are supplanted or erased. Instead, it contrasts Khmer notions of *prei* with European ideas of dark and frightening, and later romanticized and ordered, spaces and suggests how these conceptions both clashed against and influenced each other within the context of colonial modernity. She concludes with a consideration of further perceptions and reinterpretations of the *prei* in the DK regime, and after, as a site of brutal memory, as "a place not for flights of birds or fancy, but a place smothered with too many memories, collective and individual, of death, denial, and destitution." As in many of the other essays that follow, her method of reading stories considers the continuity of certain cultural tropes within the clear context of cultural change. While stories about boundaries between *srok* and *prei* provide a historical lens through which to view Khmer understandings of order, the reading must be continuously adjusted: "as societies change, so does the cultural literacy required to make sense of such tales." Following Chandler, Edwards contends that

despite the derisive way in which sources like "oral history, legend, normative poems, and song" were viewed by some colonial scholars and officials, the extent to which they "persisted in the daily lives of most Cambodians" made them productive sources for supplying "alternative readings of the past." While Edwards describes these sources as "alternative readings of the past," we also employ her phrase in this volume more broadly—to invoke the stories that historians themselves tell about history.

The volume concludes with the section "New Songs," a play on Chandler's reference to the ethnographic work of Fredrik Barth, where he found the imagery of "songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on." These three essays combine recent ethnographic research with innovative readings of past and contemporary Khmer discourses on reconstituting order.[31] All three essays are concerned with analyzing the redeployment of enduring rituals, tropes, and paradigms in the rituals, architecture, social structures, and narratives the authors have encountered in their work on contemporary postrevolutionary society. The discussions move back and forth between current political and social realities and the realm of social and religious representation and imagination that Erik Davis terms the Khmer imaginaries (*imaginaire*), the "mental universe" of "social symbols, significations, tropes, and themes" that make it "possible for people who speak the same language to understand the words that come out of each other's mouths."

Drawing on Chandler's use of a narrative about religious building to understand how nineteenth-century Khmer tried to reconstitute meaning and order following experiences of social chaos, and on his own extensive ethnographic expertise on contemporary Cambodian society and religion, John Marston's essay, "Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos," considers the highly conspicuous phenomenon of contemporary religious-building projects since the Pol Pot period. In particular, Marston examines how contemporary building projects self-reflexively appropriate Buddhist prophetic themes and images of the Angkorean past to establish legitimacy. In the aftermath of social turmoil, he suggests, one of these building projects self-consciously draws on images of national suffering, unity, purification, protection, and the greatness of the past in its effort to "realize social organization (and moral order) in practice" and open up "possibilities for a Cambodian future." Like Ledgerwood, Marston points to some of the ways in which major themes associated with Khmer identity and history—Angkor as the essence of Khmer civilization, the spiritual power of forest hermits, Buddhist prophesies of decline and regeneration—are used selectively by Khmer in constructing new postsocialist identities. One set of bas-reliefs that Marston examines fuses socialist realism with Angkorean stylistic features, invoking the Buddhist tradition of merit-making through religious-building projects and the idea of religious commitment as a means of reversing prophesied social moral decline, in this case implicitly associated with the international standing of the Khmer nation. This multi-layered, reflexive, and sometimes self-contradictory narrative captures the ambivalent experience of the present social order that Marston sees as especially evocative of Khmer self-representation today.

"Ritual in 1990 Cambodian Political Theatre: New Songs at the Edge of the Forest," by Judy Ledgerwood, is a revealing analysis of a "royal" ritual performed by

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[31] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 98–99, citing Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), p. 267.

the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) triumvirate of Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen at an astrologically auspicious time in November 1990, at the royal palace in Phnom Penh. The essay examines the multivalent and, as recognized in Marston's work, strikingly reflexive ways in which contemporary Khmer are invoking order and constructing identity, power, and meaning in the postsocialist state. Following Chandler's analysis of the nineteenth-century Khmer king Ang Duong "going through the motions" of asserting the legitimacy of his new reign through ritual acts associated with kingship, Ledgerwood views the PRK leaders as "political actors seeking to redefine and employ key symbols in a competition for power." The 1990 water festival invoked not only Buddhist practices and symbols, such as merit-making through giving alms to monks and the planting of a Bodhi tree, but also the Angkorian past, Brahmanic court rituals, the toppling of the Khmer Rouge regime, and seasonal ceremonies in Europe. As the 1990 ceremony was reconstructed, it highlighted the "scientific, rational, 'modern' facts" about flooding, the reversal of the Tonle Sap, and soil fertility, while omitting other features of the ritual's religious meaning and social saliency. Yet the subtext of the ceremony simultaneously drew on the Buddhist millenarian prophesies referred to by Ledgerwood, Hansen, and Marston, linking agricultural fertility and prosperity to righteous political leadership and legitimacy.

The volume ends with Erik Davis's evocative and "imaginative" essay, "Imaginary Conversations with Mothers about Death." Davis's essay "takes flight" from his conversations with David Chandler (the real and changing person), and "imaginary David," the author of "Songs," who took shape in Davis's mind through the imagined dialogue that grew out of reading that essay and writing this one. Davis suggests that reading "Songs" left him, like others, with insights into the existence of a "shared world of Khmer culture" that came into focus through Chandler's reading of the "occult connections" between a variety of unorthodox sources. Drawing on this conviction, the work of another of his "intellectual mothers," Steven Collins, and on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and Carlos Castoriadis, Davis argues for a way of viewing both continuity and reinterpretation of symbols in a Khmer thought world through the interpretive devise of the imaginary, or *imaginaire*. In particular, he wants to track the "remarkably stable" existence of "symbols of motherhood, sustenance, and death" whose reading allows us to see "various, but not infinite, moral judgments" arising within a shared universe. Reading back and forth between two Khmer stories about characters who reconstitute meaning after loss and an ethnographic story from his recent fieldwork about an elderly woman who must do the same, Davis suggests that the stories help us to see how Khmer have in the past and continue now to view social relationships, dependence, and patronage. His discussion of dependence and mothers also enables him to move from Khmer thought worlds to scholarly thought worlds concerned with Cambodian history and culture, and to the relationships of dependency between scholars and their "intellectual mothers" who nourish us with "imaginary conversations" that give birth to new historical narratives. "[T]here is a way in which this work is not entirely mine, no matter how much a part I may have played in realizing it," Davis writes. "Rather, it emerged from conversations with a David founded at a particular moment in his own thought," through the writing of "Songs."

Davis's reflections on the regeneration of scholarly ideas and stories are a fitting end to the volume. His remarks also convey the breadth and length of the influence

of Chandler's "Songs" on the field, more than twenty-five years after it was first written. Davis, a PhD candidate in religious studies at the University of Chicago, was finishing his dissertation fieldwork in Cambodia as he wrote the conclusion to his essay. Having named Chandler as one of the "mothers" of his ideas, he elegantly closes his essay with observations of a *Châmroaen Ayu* ("life-increasing") ceremony taking place outside his window, where he hears a religious teacher "singing a hymn in praise of mothers, whose lives have nourished our own ..."

The recognition of the boundaries and limits of our own fragmented perceptions is, of course, a preoccupation of the historian's vocation. In the tangled border between fictional forest and real people's lives, it is sometimes difficult to keep sight of what is most important about representing historical ideas and people, the "touch" and feeling that Thompson discusses in this volume, which also intersect with what Eco describes as the "consoling function" of fiction, the ability to remember and shed light on "the immensity of things that happened."[32] Yet, drawing on what we have learned about interpretive paths from Chandler, we find scholarly representations of a society or history to be better, or at least more true, when they contain a reflexivity about how they are like reconciling myths and how they are like reality. "A myth is ... efficacious to the extent that it succeeds, by symbols, in identifying with each other, things that in fact are different, often blandly asserting contradictions."[33] As ethnographers and cultural, literary, and religious historians attempting to represent reality, we have learned that what really happens can be surprising and unclear, defying reconciling explanations, tragic, inspiring, capturable in fragments and moments, and often impossible, as Chandler concludes in "Songs," to explain adequately. Our efforts to express and find meaning in what has happened not only connect us to the historical people we study, they help us more fully to comprehend the narrative, symbolic, and analytical capacities that make us all human, what Chandler evocatively describes as "no more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on ..."[34]

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[32] Eco, *Six Walks*, p. 87.

[33] Mabbett and Chandler, "Introduction," to *India Seen from the East*, p. xi.

[34] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, p. 99.

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COMING TO CAMBODIA

David Chandler

Over the years, people have often asked me how I became interested in Cambodia. Like many things in my life so far, my decision to work there was a combination of desire and luck.

In early 1959, after a few months in the US Foreign Service, I was asked like other newcomers to set out my preferences for overseas postings.

Where was I to go? I was twenty-six years old and single. I had just completed eight months as a college lecturer in Puerto Rico. Behind that lay two years marking time as a typist in the army in Washington, DC; a year of graduate work; and four years of college, where I majored in English. I had come into the Foreign Service without precise long-term ambitions. I saw myself less as a potential diplomat than as a writer, and more specifically as a poet. I hoped that a diplomatic career would feed and support my writing habit. I compared myself (while talking to myself) to the French poet-diplomats Paul Claudel and St.-Jean Perse. Claudel, incidentally, when he visited Angkor in the 1920s, had found it "one of the most accursed ... evil places that I know."

So where was I to go? Southeast Asia beckoned, although I forget just why. I began asking people about the region. A cousin whom I liked had just come back from a couple of years in Bangkok. He suggested that I go to Cambodia, about which I knew nothing. I think he said it was "more authentic" than Thailand. I was an Orientalist without knowing it, I guess, and the word "authentic" settled the issue. I volunteered for a Cambodian posting, to be preceded by Khmer language training at the Foreign Service Institute.

Classes began in September 1959. There were two other students of Khmer: Peter Poole, who left the Foreign Service later on but remained in the government, and Carter Townes, a lively US Information Service (USIS) officer in his forties who was returning to Cambodia for a second tour. Carter was hounded out of the government a few years later because he was gay. In the late 1980s, he died in Oregon where he was a radio talk-show host and the mayor of his hometown.

Our teacher, Hang Phan Vanphut, was a laid-back, twenty-something member of Cambodia's small elite. His classes were good-humored and sometimes chaotic. There was no Khmer-English dictionary in those days and no accessible linguistic texts. Vanphut did his best, but traveling without a road map made the classes less productive than they might have been.

The best parts of my eleven months of training were the seemingly anarchic, but insightful, visits to the class by the linguist Dale Purtle, an eccentric chain-smoker whose only personal possession, aside from his clothes and a mattress, was an opium weight in the form of a duck that he had picked up in Laos. Dale was in love with Cambodia and with its language. I caught up with him again in the 1980s, when he was living south of San Francisco, still chain-smoking, happily married, with a house full of possessions.

When classes ended in September 1960, I drove to San Francisco to put my second-hand convertible onto a ship. After a couple of days relishing my first encounter with California, I flew to Hong Kong, where I was measured for the white suit with two pairs of trousers that was the required diplomatic costume for a tropical posting in those days. In late October, I landed in Phnom Penh. As I've said many times, the sight of cows being chased off the runway by determined women with sticks foreshadowed some of the rackety charm and "otherness" of Cambodia that has nourished my affection for the country and its people ever since.

Over the next two years, I slowly assembled what the novelist Louis Auchincloss, quoting Henry James, has called a writer's capital—the fund of memories, friendships, insights, and encounters that continue to sustain me after four decades of thinking, writing, and talking about Cambodia.

I started work the day after I arrived. The US Embassy was located in a run-down, four-story building, once a school, just off Norodom Boulevard, a block north of the Cine Lux. Offices for USIS and the US aid mission occupied two buildings across the street. All in all, the Embassy and its dependencies, including a military aid mission, numbered about a hundred people. Offices opened at eight, closed for two hours at lunch, and closed for the day, I think, at six. During my tour, I worked successively as an economic officer, a political officer, and a vice consul. My apartment provided by the Embassy was a hundred yards away, and I found it easy to settle in.

The Ambassador for most of my tour was William C. Trimble, Princeton '32, a gentlemanly career diplomat from Baltimore. Trimble was soft-spoken, tolerant, impeccably turned out, and the only US Ambassador who ever earned Sihanouk's respect. His deputy was C. Robert Moore, a sharp, approachable man who later served as Ambassador to Syria and Mali. Ambassador Trimble did not supervise our day-to-day work. Bob Moore, although intellectually demanding, was a joy to work with.

I was lucky to meet up with both of them again in the 1990s, well before they died, and I recall with pleasure the friendship and guidance that they offered me at an earlier stage of my career. Their successors, under whom I served briefly, were also agreeable, dedicated professionals, but they made less of an impression on me.

The Embassy was an American family, marooned in a backwater of Southeast Asia where hardly anyone spoke English. The family came equipped with affections, quirks, quarrels, and disorders that are best forgotten. It is worthwhile to say, however, that I always enjoyed my work and from among my colleagues in those years I gathered several lifelong friends.

The Cold War and the passions that fueled it were in full swing in 1960. Cold War thinking dominated American policies toward Cambodia and the rest of the world. Most of what we reported from Phnom Penh fitted Cold War tactics and priorities, often in a Procrustean way. From the perspective of 2007, the global competition between "us" and "them" seems Manichean, cyclopean, and simple-

minded, but in those days it was a congenial mindset for many of us and a game that nearly everyone in the Foreign Service was playing without forethought or regrets. Especially in the backwash of the Vietnam War, it's hard to recapture or explain the enthusiasm with which we went about our tasks, happy to be serving a young, stylish, and adventurous new president, John F. Kennedy, in a global confrontation with China and the USSR. We were delighted to do what we could for what we assumed was an overwhelmingly just cause.

We couldn't do very much. Cambodia was a drowsy, peculiar place. Prince Norodom Sihanouk presided over it with benign, sometimes hysterical, insistence. He treated the kingdom as a stage and a personal possession. He was immensely popular with rural people and with his fawning entourage. A few intellectuals grumbled about him, but there was no real opposition to his rule. His love of the country and his "children" blended seamlessly with his high opinion of himself. To his admirers, Sihanouk "was" Cambodia. Even to people who failed to succumb to his charm he was a tireless, patriotic politician, working to keep his country from becoming a casualty of the Cold War.

It's crucial to recall that although the Vietnam War lay in wait for us "around the corner," none of us imagined the dimensions it would take. Sihanouk worked hard to make Cambodia an "island of peace," and we were all cocooned inside it.

Ambassador Trimble spent much of his time trying to convince people in Washington that Sihanouk, by refusing to ally himself with the United States, was neither a criminal nor insane. Trimble even suggested in a couple of telegrams that Cambodia might have national interests of its own and that our Cold War policies could perhaps best be served by dealing with the kingdom, at least to some extent, on its own terms. His mild remonstrances failed to strike a chord. In the early 1970s, during Cambodia's civil war, Ambassador Emory Swank tried and failed to set a somewhat similar agenda. In his case, unwelcome suggestions ruined a promising career.

Cambodia itself had little intrinsic interest for most Americans in Phnom Penh. Few of them fell in love with the country as thoroughly as I did, although Michael Vickery, then teaching English in Kompong Thom, was busy building up his colossal fund of knowledge, Bill Thomas of the Embassy took time to assemble an exhaustive guide book to Cambodian birds, and Dick Melville, then working with USAID, traveled widely, sometimes on elephant-back, in search of birds and animals to shoot. I joined him in early 1961 on a two-day excursion on elephants into the Stieng country of western Kratie. Bill and Dick, I am sad to say, both died in 2004.

As a language officer, and because I was single and curious, I probably had more exposure to the country and more fun than most people in the Embassy did. Some of my enjoyment was work-related. Throughout my tour, I was asked to monitor Sihanouk's interminable speeches broadcast and then rebroadcast on the radio. On several occasions, wearing the white suit, I accompanied Ambassador Trimble to inaugurations of American aid projects, where I was asked, in Sihanouk's presence, to summarize the Ambassador's remarks in Khmer. In 1962 I traveled to Takeo to talk to Cambodians who had fled the fighting across the border in Vietnam, and on another occasion I traveled around eastern Cambodia acting as MC for a USIS-sponsored American folksinger. Knowing Khmer also enabled me, sometimes, to pick up useful information from people outside Embassy circles.

When I was off duty, I mingled with people my own age, entertaining them in my apartment, eating dinner in their homes, or dining at French restaurants like Bar

Jean, La Taverne, and St. Hubert. In those days, there were no restaurants in Phnom Penh that specialized in Cambodian cuisine. Television, which a cartoonist in the *Washington Post* has aptly called a weapon of mass destruction, had not yet arrived in Cambodia. There were French and Indian movies, sometimes dubbed in Khmer, and American ones that were screened at the Embassy on Friday nights. With my Cambodian friends, I sometimes attended Khmer theater performances, which were gritty amalgams of Indian musical epics and raucous slapstick drama—Vishnu wearing a wristwatch, clowns discussing current events, and so on.

My Cambodian life began at breakfast and the moment I came home, because my cook-*factotum*, Chea Thon, spoke no English and very little French. Thon was a couple of years younger than I was. He came from the rice-growing village of Krol Ko in Kompong Speu, a few miles south of Udong and about fifteen miles from Phnom Penh. He had learned to read, write, and cook as a novice monk. He told me that if the food he prepared wasn't good enough the monks would slap him. As a result, I guess, the dishes he cooked for me were tasty and varied.

Thon was a patient teacher of Khmer and often took me on visits to Krol Ko. I will come to these visits later on. In 1973 I had a long letter from him, telling me about his marriage and children, and then he vanished, probably, given his forthright, good-humored personality, a victim of the Pol Pot regime.

Once a week I took Cambodian lessons from a former monk named Chy Lat. Together we worked our way through a collection of folktales and some nineteenth-century poetry. Years later, as a graduate student in Bangkok, I returned to the folktale collection, where I discovered "How the *koun lok* bird got its feathers," one of the texts that I wrote about in the essay that gives this book its name.

Phnom Penh in those days was a somnolent, handsome city, with mustard-colored or whitewashed villas and government buildings, and with wide, almost empty, boulevards bordered with flame trees and bougainvillea. It had a sun-struck, provincial elegance that reminded some visitors of southern France, and others of Celesteville, the African city ruled compassionately, in a famous children's book written in France in the 1930s, by Babar, King of the Elephants.

There were about 500,000 people in the capital in those days, perhaps a quarter as many as lived there in 2007. Running from north to south, the city was divided informally into four zones, housing Vietnamese, Chinese, French (and other foreigners), and Khmer. The Embassy, for example, was in the "French" zone, but my apartment on Rue Hassakan, a hundred yards nearer the river, was almost in the "Chinese" quarter, teeming then as now with commercial life.

Americans seldom ventured into the northern or southern parts of the city, although Peter Hickman of USIS lived in the south, in a wooden house where he kept a bear in a cage, a python, and several other animals. Near Wat Tuol Tampung, unknown to the Embassy, Saloth Sar (who later called himself Pol Pot) taught at a private school and was edging up in the hierarchy of the clandestine Communist Party. After I became his biographer in the 1990s, I often wondered if we had passed each other in the street.

The anthropologist May Ebihara told me that her Phnom Penh, like mine, rarely extended south of the Independence Monument, west of the New Market, or north of Wat Phnom. May died in 2005. She was an inspiring friend and mentor. Her untimely death was saddening to me, her many friends, and all the contributors to this book. Our section of the city was "colonial," French and Chinese in appearance, and filled with people who spoke French and Chinese. Sihanouk himself was a dyed-

in-the-wool Francophile and set the tone for much of the capital's cultural life. A statue of Marshal Joffre, France's military leader in World War I, presided over a roundabout near the French Embassy. It was later melted down by the Khmer Rouge. In Siem Reap, Bernard Groslier and a handful of French archaeologists supervised the maintenance and restoration of the Angkor temples for the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient. France owned and managed the country's prosperous rubber plantations. Several daily newspapers and monthly magazines were in French, which was the country's official language.

It was easy in this *ambience* for some of us to take French *clichés* about Cambodia more or less on faith. The received wisdom, echoed by Sihanouk in his speeches, was that the Khmer were childish, backward, affable people who had once constructed the temples at Angkor and now in their "decline" had little to offer beyond their helplessness and *joie de vivre.*

As I made friends with Cambodians who knew no French, however, I began to feel that keys to understanding their country lay deeper than these demeaning "explanations." They lay buried in Cambodia's often violent precolonial past and in the colorful, closely woven fabric of Cambodian daily life. Cambodia and its people existed on their own terms, breathing in and out, largely unaffected by French disdain or by France's "civilizing mission." The country that I came to know—like France, for that matter—was complex, resonant, and easy to love. The longer I stayed in Cambodia, the deeper the country burrowed into me.

I traveled around the country as much as I could. Cambodia's network of paved roads built by the French was well maintained in the 1960s by *corvée* labor. The roads connected the kingdom's major towns. They were almost empty of automobiles, although ox-carts, dogs, cattle, and people asleep on the road often made driving hazardous.

On weekends I drove to lunch in one provincial capital or another, went to the beach, looked for out-of-the-way ruins, or hung out with Cambodian friends. Once, in the woods near Kompong Cham, following directions in a 1920s guidebook, I stumbled across a dozen eighth-century stone statues, probably worth tens of thousands of dollars, scattered disconsolately in the underbrush. One of the statues, a headless female torso, had fresh joss sticks placed reverently at her feet. Wholesale looting of Cambodian art had not yet begun.

My overnight trips were almost all to Angkor. I could reach Siem Reap in a few hours of easy driving, setting off after work on Friday and arriving at the Hotel de la Paix, near the Siem Reap market, in time for a latish dinner of *steak frites* and *bière* Larue. Over the next two days I would tour the ruins, often with Cambodian friends whom I had brought along, before setting out for home on Sunday afternoon. In those days, the ruins, like the roads, were almost deserted. There were very few tourists, no tourist guides, and no one selling "you want scarf" or "nice cold drink." In the hushed, well-shaded park, there were more trees, more local people, and more monkeys, butterflies, and birds than there are today. On many occasions, my friends and I had the haunting temples to ourselves.

When I came back to Angkor in 1992, I was taking a break from a research mission for Amnesty International, and I saw the temples with a different eye. In the intervening thirty years, Cambodia had been engulfed by civil war, foreign invasions, and the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. The temples were still beautiful, of course, but in the aftermath of the Pol Pot era, and from a human-rights perspective, I began to wonder about the human costs involved in hauling, raising, and carving

the stones, digging the moats and reservoirs, and raising the temple mountains. Coercion, violence, and megalomania, it seemed, had always been features of Cambodian governance. In 1992, after talking to bandaged victims of political harassment in Siem Reap, I asked myself if the Khmer had always been brutal to each other. I wondered why Suryavarman II deserved such a gigantic personal tomb. I also wondered what Jayavarman VII was saying to "his" people as he forced them to cover the landscape with vast, supposedly magnanimous buildings. Paul Claudel may have foreshadowed my concerns in 1923 when he wrote in his journal that he was "dimly aware of a strange feeling of depression and disgust" after spending an entire day in Angkor Wat.

Perhaps, I thought later, in Angkorean times there had been compensations for oppression. These might have been connected with comforting religious beliefs, the absence of alternatives, and the shared feeling that the people inhabiting Angkor lived in an enormous, semi-magical city that was endowed by their ancestors (and by the gods) with ample water for rice, a splendid king, and a self-absorbed, protective (and coercive) ruling class. The impression that Angkor was, after all, essentially a happy place emerges from Zhou Daguan's account of Angkor in the 1290s.

Nonetheless, visiting the temples in 1992 made me hesitant to use aesthetics or art history as the only approaches to these haunted, overpowering constructions. Just as "my" 1960s were a time when I looked at Cambodia with most of the politics and violence left out, it was no longer possible, thirty years later, to think of the country in an apolitical, aesthetic, slightly condescending way.

In late 1961, I began to visit my cook Thon's home village of Krol Ko. Thon went there on Saturdays on his day off. I was curious to see what the village was like, and Thon generously invited me to visit it with him one afternoon. His widowed mother, his brother, and aunts were gracious and welcoming. Among these people I encountered the same profound good manners and hard-wired hospitality as I did in 1990 when Susan and I visited May Ebihara's village, which she calls "Svay," to attend a wedding. These characteristics broke to the surface again on the far sadder occasion of Ingrid Muan's Buddhist funeral in Chrui Changvar in January 2005.

I went back to Krol Ko with Thon many times—twice for weddings, but usually for a few hours on Saturday afternoon. We would bring some fruit and some food to cook, and small presents for his mother and her sisters. On several occasions, local musicians broke out their instruments and played for us. I chatted with people in a desultory way and walked around Krol Ko taking pictures. I listened to what the villagers told me, and I began to work out who was related to whom, who was richer than others, who had authority, and which villagers were treated as buffoons. I learned about family incomes, Krol Ko's rice and palm sugar crops, and the villagers' amicable relations with the local Chinese shopkeeper. I heard their thoughts about child rearing, different Cambodian dishes, Buddhism, the government, and anything else they felt like talking about. They told me, for example, that everyone they encountered in the government was corrupt and unpleasant. The one exception they made was Sihanouk, whom they revered. I fielded questions about America and about my family, or my lack of one, because my bachelorhood was a source of polite bewilderment to them. On one occasion, I told an old lady that it would take "many weeks" to reach America by cart. The villagers and I smiled at each other a lot, and I came to believe, as I still do, that Krol Ko in those far-off times enclosed and embodied a truth or a kind of answer that I could only discover if I stayed there much longer, or kept coming back.

Unfortunately, the wheels of the US government continued to whir, and time ran out for me at the end of 1962. I returned home in time for Christmas and two months' leave, to be followed in Washington, DC, by a few weeks of briefing and orientation about my next posting, supposedly to Panama. In fact, I was able to change this assignment, and I ended up working in Colombia for two years.

I had no idea at the end of 1962 whether I would ever return to Cambodia or that I would become a Cambodian scholar. I also had no idea about how to *use* my Cambodian experiences in a literary way. In twenty-five months in the country, I had written no poetry at all, and my irregularly maintained journal was filled with entries like "R tells me that spiders at one stage could speak Khmer." All the same, I knew that something wonderful had happened to me. My writer's capital was an inchoate, unwritten jumble of friendships, encounters, and half-remembered conversations. It included the folktales, poems, and proverbs I had read with Chy Lat and the times I had spent, painfully cross-legged, paying respect to monks. It was made up of "national day" celebrations at embassies in Phnom Penh (in the white suit) and some boisterous dinners with friends. It included the photographs I had taken and failed to take of the sugar palm strewn landscape around Krol Ko, of Angkor, or of children scuttling off in packs to swim in a brown pond. My writer's capital was made up of unhealthy, hairless dogs nosing in trash, a Brigitte Bardot movie dubbed into Khmer, and the benign, implacable stone faces of Angkor Thom.

My time in Colombia was a disappointment. By the time I came back to Washington in 1965, the prospects of pursuing a diplomatic career for another thirty years began to pale, but I had no ideas about other things to do. What turned out to be my final posting, however, solved the issue marvelously. I was assigned to the Foreign Service Institute and put in charge of the orientation courses for junior diplomats and aid officials going to Southeast Asia. After a year of this, having listened to inspiring lectures by tenured historians, some of them a little younger than myself, I decided to resign from the Foreign Service and pursue an academic career. Encouraged by the late Professor Harry Benda, a dynamic lecturer for my courses, I applied successfully to the Southeast Asian MA program at Yale. I was also urged to do so by my friend Bernard Fall, whom I had gotten to know in Phnom Penh. Bernard told me that the chance to study with Paul Mus at Yale would change my life, and he was right. Bernard was a courageous witness to history. He was killed two years later in Vietnam.

Looking back across my forty-eight years of engagement with Cambodia, it is impossible to list all the people I am grateful to or all the ones I remember with affection and respect. It is impossible to pay adequate homage to the ones who are dead. What is important at this stage of my life is that another generation of scholars in love with Cambodia is hard at work examining its present, its thought world, and its past, helping us to understand what I once called the songs at the edge of the forest, and teaching even younger people the words.

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INTRODUCTION TO "SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST"

David Chandler

The essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" was written in June 1978 for a workshop on Southeast Asian intellectual history sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. It was first published in a 1982 volume edited by Alexander Woodside and David Wyatt called *Moral Order and the Question of Change*. In 2003, I made some slight emendations to the text that brought the references up to date.

"Songs" is my own favorite of my essays because I think it manages to capture, via the three texts that it examines, some of the poignancy, stylishness, and common sense of the people I befriended when I worked in Cambodia in the early 1960s. The two folktales and the nineteenth-century verse chronicle that I discuss in the essay are rich in tensions and ambiguities. They cross and re-cross the borders between the forest (*prei*) and the rice fields (*veal srae*), between destiny and chance, and between savagery and civilization. They ask why suffering happens. They try to explain how the rewards for virtue are often hard to perceive. The chronicle tells the story of a real family's tribulations and shares a mythic quality, as well as a fully Cambodian world, with the two folktales, which are, of course, impossible to date. The three texts are best understood by placing them in our mind's eye inside the landscapes where they occur—in a muddy, swift-flowing river filled with crocodiles, at the edge of the forest as night comes on and the *kaun lok* birds cry out forlornly, and on the grounds of a glittering new Buddhist *vihara* in Kompong Thom in 1856.

I wrote "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" in the last year of the Pol Pot regime, before the regime's collapse was anywhere in sight. I felt sad and desperate. In the essay I wanted to pay homage to a country that I suspected was being destroyed, and to the men and women, many of them already dead, who had kept me company, shared their language with me, and showed me portions of their culture. I was delighted to learn, as I revised the paper for publication, that the Khmer Rouge regime had collapsed. Later on, I discovered that a handful of my closest friends had survived.

Twenty-five years later, as I write, Cambodia itself has managed to survive in a lively, partly familiar, but clearly altered state. I feel that these haunting,

straightforward, unconsciously elegant texts are superb examples of what it is that has drawn me, for over forty years, toward the sun-drenched kingdom, its history and its people.

SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST: PERCEPTIONS OF ORDER IN THREE CAMBODIAN TEXTS

David Chandler

"Mon ami, faisons toujours des contes. Tandis qu'on fait un conte, on est gai; on ne songe à rien de facheux. Le temps se passe; le conte de la vie s'achève, sans qu'on s'aperçoive."
— Diderot, "Letter to Grimm"

When the French imposed their protectorate on Cambodia in 1863, they took control of a society that had been pulverized by half a century of invasions and civil war. In these years, Cambodia often lacked a monarch, or had its monarch imprisoned, or closely patronized, by one of its two neighbors. In many ways, the first fifty years of the nineteenth century were "dark ages" resembling those which the country re-entered in the 1970s. I have discussed the narrative history of this period elsewhere.[1] For our purposes it is important to note that many of the precolonial manuscripts which have come down to us date from the 1850s when, under King Duang (r. 1847–1860), Cambodian literature, benefiting from a few years of peace, enjoyed a renaissance.[2] One of the texts I will discuss is a chronicle that looks back over the century from the vantage point of 1856. The other two are folktales, chosen from a wide range of published work, which seem to me to heighten and exemplify some of the themes in the chronicle and the perceptions of ambiguity in the moral order which the chronicle transmits.

This paper was originally prepared for a symposium on Southeast Asian intellectual history, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, which took place in Ithaca, New York, in August 1978. In revising it, I benefited from discussions with the late Lode Brakel, Ron and Barbara Hartley, and Tony Day. I am also grateful for comments from Bob Elson, Craig Reynolds, Thong Thel, Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., and Alexander Woodside.

[1] David Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1848" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974).

[2] See David Chandler, "Going through the Motions: Ritual and Restorative Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia," in *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Lorraine Gesick, Monograph Series no. 26 (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), p. 99.

Before turning to the texts we might look briefly at the semantics of Cambodian conceptions of order; these are as valid for most of the twentieth century as they are for the nineteenth.

The word for "order" (as in, "to put in order"), or more exactly, the phrase *robāb rap roy*, means "the way things are [properly] arranged," to place them symmetrically like books and papers on a desk, and also to rank them correctly, i.e., hierarchically, the ways they have been ranked before.[3] The phrase *lomdab lomdoy* implies order on a horizontal plane, while another phrase for "order," *sandap thno'p*, means literally "customary fingers' width measurements," where the word translated as "customary" (*sandap*) means "what has been heard"—presumably as the Buddhist Institute Cambodian Dictionary suggests over and over again.[4] This phrase is used to describe order in vertical terms, i.e., in terms of strata.

There is nothing ad hoc about these terms for "order." The contrast between wildness (*prei*, which means "forest") and what is grown, civilized, arranged, predictable, like rice or families, is common to many Southeast Asian cultures and is one which I shall emphasize in the paper.[5]

In a similar vein, the Cambodian word for "to be" (*chea*) also means "normal," as in the phrase *chea vinh*, "to regain one's [normal] health." The relationship between things as they are when they are properly arranged and things as they ought to be (or perhaps, the only way they can "be") is thus a close one, linguistically, as suggested by our own colloquial phrase, "That's the way it [always, repeatedly] goes."

In nineteenth-century Cambodia, when people were always in danger and almost always illiterate, examples of orderliness (such as an elegant ceremony, a design in silk, or a properly chanted poem) were few and far between; all the same, the semantic overlappings mentioned above suggest that, to many Cambodians, things, ideas, and people—societies, in fact[6]—were thought to be safer and more authentic when they were ranked and in balance, arranged into the same hierarchical pattern (however ineffectual or unhappy) which they had occupied before. Wildness was to be feared, and so was innovation. "Don't avoid a winding path," says a

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[3] Editors' note: we have maintained the original transliteration of Khmer in this essay, except in the case of "*kaun lok*," the name and cry of the "child-of-the-world" bird, to match the now commonly used oral transliteration system used by the other contributors in this volume.

[4] Buddhist Institute, *Vanananukrama Khmera, Dictionnaire Cambodgien* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1968), p. 1251.

[5] See Penny Edwards's essay in this volume, as well as S. Lewitz, "Les inscriptions modernes d'Ankor Wat," *Journal Asiatique* (1972): 116; Denys Lombard, "La vision de la forêt à Java," *Etudes Rurales* 53–56 (1974): 479–85; Gabrielle Martel, *Lovea, Village des Environs d'Angkor* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1975), p. 36, which points out the philosophical contrast between the Cambodian words *sruk* [*srok*] (cultivated and settled land) and *prei*. For a stimulating analysis of this contrast in Western thought, see Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," in H. White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 150–82.

[6] The Cambodian word for "society" (*sangkum*) appears to be a neologism for it does not appear in the J. Guesdon, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Française*, Paris, 1930. The work itself apparently derives from a rarely used Sanskrit one, *samgrama* (Pali *samgāma*), meaning "assembly," or "host." Ian Mabbett, personal communication. For a similar development in Vietnam, see David Marr, "Concepts of Individual and Self in Twentieth-Century Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 37,2 (2000): 769–96.

Cambodian proverb. "And don't [automatically] take a straight one, either. Choose the path your ancestors have trod."[7]

Cambodians in the nineteenth century—at least insofar as their social ideas are reflected in their literature—were backward-looking people, but I don't mean to suggest that they were nostalgic for a verifiable golden age—at Angkor, for example. Instead, by "backward-looking" I mean only that their social conduct was based on ideas, techniques, and phrases which had been passed along through time and space like heirlooms, with the result that people were continually reliving, repeating, or "restoring" what was past—in ceremonial terms, in adages, and in the agricultural cycle. Things which could not be predictably transmitted, like violence, droughts, and disease, were linked in people's minds with what was wild, and less distinctly perhaps with immoral, unremembered behavior in the past. Similarly, high rank, people thought, could be traced to meritorious, unverifiable behavior in *another life*. This dependence on the past for explanations, and the partial disassociation of people from responsibility for their actions, produced tensions in people trying to construct a usable moral order in terms of the everyday world. What comfort was it, for example, to "explain" that meritorious people (i.e., those with wealth and power) monopolized exploitation and commanded violence? How could supposedly "universal monarchs"—like the Cambodian queen in the 1840s—be held prisoner by the Vietnamese? Why did meritorious people die?

The chronicle I will discuss deals with some of these questions in the context of events, while the folktales face them metaphorically. The chronicle, after all, is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century, while the stories, probably much older than that, passed through the nineteenth century on their way to being written down. Both of them deal with crises in loyalty and culture resembling those which Cambodians as a whole endured in the 1830s and 40s; for this reason, I think, the three texts can be discussed together.

The first of the stories sets out to explain why a certain magpie-like bird in Cambodia is known by its cry, *kaun lok*, a phrase meaning "child of man," or "child of the world."[8]

Three small girls are abandoned by their widowed mother who has no interest in them and plans to remarry a "good-for-nothing man." She leaves them to grow rice beside a pond in the forest, where

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[7] A. Pannetier, "Proverbes cambodgiens," *Bulletin de l' École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, XV,3 (1915): 71. There are several collections of proverbs in Khmer, which would be rewarding to study; see Solange Thierry, "Essai sur les proverbs cambodgiens," *Revue de Pyschologie des Peuples* 13 (1958); and Karen Fisher-Nguyen, "Khmer Proverbs: Images and Rules," in *Cambodian Culture since 1975*, ed. May Ebihara, Judy Ledgerwood, and Carol Mortland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 91–104.

[8] For the Khmer texts of this story, see Buddhist Institute (comp.), *Brajum rioen pren bhak 4* (Collected Stories vol. 4) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1966), pp. 1–10. See also Solange Thierry, *Etude d'un corpus de contes cambodgiens traditionnels* (Lille: Atelier Reproduction des thèses, Université de Lille III; Paris: Diffusion H. Champion, 1978), pp. 217–22. I have translated this story in *The Friends Who Tried to Empty the Sea: Selected Cambodian Folk Tales* (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976). Thanks to Colin Poole, Cambodia Coordinator of the Wildlife Conservation Society, and my friend Sok Pirun, who remembers trying to trap *kaun lok* birds as a child in the 1950s, I have tentatively identified the *kaun lok* as the giant ibis (*ibis giganticus*), which is not especially large.

> She gave them each a handful of cooked rice, some uncooked rice, and a little corn. She also gave them salt, some fish-sauce, and a piece of smoldering wood with which to start a fire. She thought, "A tiger will devour them tonight, for certain. If they manage to survive, they'll be dead from hunger soon enough."

That night as the girls lie awake terrified by the noises of the forest, they are protected by a local spirit (*arak thevoda*) who bellows to keep wild animals away and then goes off to plead on the children's behalf with Indra's guardian, Varuna.

> "There's no need to bother Indra with this problem," Varuna said. "Those girls will be changed into birds soon enough. But in the meantime, you should protect them against wild animals, and be sure they get enough to eat—small fishes and snails, for example."

Little by little, the girls take to eating their food raw. Upset by this, they try to go back to their mother, but she thinks they are lying to her (the conversation turns around a play on words): exasperated, she chases them back into the forest.

At the pond when they return the smoldering wood has gone out but some of the corn has begun to grow. The girls eat it raw, along with *krim* fish, snails, and clams. For three months the spirit keeps wild animals away from the children and the pond, and

> After six months had passed, the girls grew downy feathers all over their bodies, and their arms turned into wings. They could fly on branches now, and their new claws could grip the branches or pluck fruit ... Their lips narrowed at this time into beaks, and they lost their ability to talk. In their hearts, all the same, they knew they were people, not animals, even if when they tried to talk they had animals' voices.

Meanwhile, their mother's second husband has been sent to prison. The mother repents and comes to redeem her daughters. Even though they are birds, she can still recognize them, and follows them deeper and deeper into the forest, while they call out to her:

> We are released from our humanity; we have turned into animals, and we are far more beautiful. Don't come near us!

The mother hears only the phrase *kaun lok* ("child of the world," translated as "humanity"). She runs on after them, runs out of breath, and dies.

The second story claims to be historical, taking place during the time when Udong was the capital of Cambodia (c. 1600–1866).[9] It concerns a crocodile named

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[9] For the Khmer version of the story, see Buddhist Institute (comp.), *Brajum rioen pren bhak 5* (Collected Stories vol. 5) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1969), pp. 179–88. See also Donald Lancaster, "The Decline of Prince Sihanouk's Regime" in *Indochina in Conflict*, ed. J. J. Zasloff and A. E. Goodman (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972), p. 54. For other versions of this legend, see Evéline Porée-Maspéro, *Etude sur les rites agraires des cambodgiens*, 3 vols. (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1962–1969), pp. 92–94, 97–100, and 196–97.

Thon who is a playmate-disciple of the abbot of a Buddhist monastery at Sambaur on the upper Mekong. The abbot

> was fond of Thon and he'd often go to sit on a rock at the water's edge and call for Thon to come and play with him. Whenever the crocodile heard his voice, he hurried over to pay his respects to the abbot, taking care to honor the other monks of the monastery as well.

One day, the abbot is called away to Udong to cure a princess who has fallen ill. After a time, the crocodile misses his master and swims off after him. On the way he encounters a wicked crocodile but manages to avoid a fight. When he reaches Udong and finds the abbot resting in a pavilion beside the river, he catches him in his jaws, puts him on his back, and begins his voyage back to Sambaur.

> In the first part of the journey, Thon tried to keep the abbot out of the water. He swam along carefully, skimming the surface. When he reached the territory of the wicked crocodile, however, Thon thought to himself: "If I fight this enemy, I'll have to go up and down in the water, flailing around, and my master will fall off. What can I do? Change myself into something different? Avoid a fight?"

The crocodile swallows the abbot, defeats the wicked crocodile, and when he reaches Sambaur to disgorge his master, the abbot is dead. Filled with chagrin, Thon decides that the princess is responsible for his master's death (for without her illness, the abbot would never have left home), so he swims back to Udong and swallows the princess, whom he surprises bathing. This leads to a hunt for the crocodile, sponsored by the king, and the story closes with Thon's dismemberment and the construction of a stupa holding the princess's ashes at Sambaur.

These stories say interesting things, I think, about tensions in the moral order between servitude and autonomy, for example, wildness and humanity, destiny and chance. Both stories ask: What is an animal? Who is to blame? And who is rewarded? And they give contradictory, oddly satisfying answers.

In the girls-into-birds story, we notice that not even Indra, the king of the gods, can halt the process of devolution. The gods, like students of Levi-Strauss, recognize an abyss between the raw and the cooked. The story is not, however, a mechanical working out of this idea. Because the girls are innocent, and because a local spirit happens to be there, they are protected by the spirit's beastlike roaring from predatory beasts. Their mother, on the other hand, is a wicked human being. She dies in the forest alone, which is to say, like a beast. Just before this, the girls rejoice to be free from the human condition, even though we are told that they "knew they were still people"; their mother recognizes them in spite of their appearance; she can't understand what they say.

The story, then, is in a sense "about" the frontier between the wild and the tamed, with "human" birds on one side of the border, and an "animal" woman on the other. Once the girls turn into birds, the gods are not needed to help them, for now they are "at home" in the forest. And yet the story is richer still, for it suggests that *kaun lok* birds, even today, might be aware, as we are, of their past. The story closes by mentioning that the birds cry out "*kaun lok*" when surprised by men in their natural habitat, which lies just at the edge of the woods, along the border of the

cultivated world; and at night—perhaps at the time just after sunset, which the French refer to as *entre chien et loup*—the story says that the cry "*kaun lok* disturbs the stillness."

The story about Thon and the abbot also has a dreamlike quality which springs in part, I think, from the failure of the two characters to communicate with each other or to influences events. Thon, an animal, is capable of more subtlety of feeling than his master realizes. The monk plays with the crocodile and accepts his homage, but doesn't seem to tell him much about the world. The two don't understand each other's language or each other's mission in life. By his loyalty to the king, incomprehensible to Thon, for example, the abbot sets off a chain of deaths. By his humanly incomprehensible quarrel with another crocodile, Thon imperils his master. Seeking to save his master, the crocodile swallows him up; seeking to avenge the monk, he swallows the princess; he is a prisoner of his natural style, swept up inside a ruinous charade.

In both stories, an emphasis falls on the links between things as they are and things as they ought to be. Looking at the stories from this angle, several platitudes emerge, such as: girls who behave like birds will turn into birds; mothers who leave their children should be punished; crocodiles have no understanding of human affairs; kings are more powerful than beasts. But the stories themselves are not assertions of the status quo; they are momentarily successful assaults on it. The girls are preserved in the forest (as no one is), the crocodile is consumed with loyalty (as reptiles never are). On the whole, of course, while the stories say something about the perils of dependency, neither of them calls dependency into question. The girls, after all, try to go back to their mother; the crocodile's loyalty to his master is what eventually destroys him.

The verse chronicle from Wat Srolauv, in north central Cambodia, was composed in 1856 to commemorate the completion of the *wat* itself. The poem consists of twenty strophes, or *bot*, averaging (in typescript) about thirty lines apiece. Four distinct metric forms—all common to nineteenth-century Cambodian verse—are used. Unlike the two folk stories, the chronicle has not been published, although parts of it appear in other nineteenth-century texts.[10]

The poem traces the fortunes of an elite Cambodian family—a father, mother, and son—from about 1811 to 1856. In the course of the poem, which also tells of dislocations suffered by the kingdom, father and son die, and long stretches of the text, which was sponsored by the widowed mother, consist of dirges for these men. Wat Srolauv itself was built in memory of the son, whom many people in the audience probably knew. The author, a monk named Pech, was a relative of the sponsor, and perhaps was serving as abbot of the *wat*. Like the audience, he knew what life had been like in Srolauv under the Vietnamese protectorate and during the

[10] *Sastra lboek rabalksat (Ang Chan)* (Document concerned with the annals of Ang Chan). Manuscript from Wat Srolauv, Kompong Thom, 1856, recopied 1951, in the archives of the Buddhist Institute, Phnom Penh. I am grateful to the late Dik Keam (murdered as a "class enemy" under Pol Pot in 1976) for providing me with a typescript in 1971. A related, published verse chronicle, from the same region, is *Rioen robalksat sruk khmaer* (The Story of the Royal Lineage in Cambodia) (RRSK), Phnom Penh, 1958, which was composed in 1874, but contains many passages identical to the ones in the Wat Srolauv manuscript, and clearly draws on earlier material. For a detailed history of this period, see Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge entre le Siam et le Vietnam (de 1775 à 1860)* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991). Both of these texts have been edited and translated into French in Khin Sok, *L'annexation du Cambodge par les Vietnamens au XIXe siècle* (Paris: You Feng, 2002).

Thai Invasions of 1833 and 1841. Theirs was not a fanciful world where girls turned into birds or monks rode crocodiles. It was a world of suffering, instability, and war. The poem is about what has happened to a kingdom, a family, and an audience, all sharing a decline in merit for reasons that are difficult but necessary for the poet to explain. The poem describes two attempts by King Duang and the widowed mother to push back the wilderness and to restore and reenact the seemliness of the past by reconstituting kingship and sponsoring a *wat*. The poem itself, in this way, is an expiatory act. As far as we know, it was recited only on the one occasion.

In the preamble, the poet discusses the notions of merit and rebirth, which are central to the poem:

> Sometimes people have merit, high status, possessions, more than anyone else, for sure, and on other occasions people are small and low, their lineage and descendants insignificant, like poor orphans altogether. This is destiny [*karma*]; suffering comes as a result of what we have done; merit and demerit are all mixed up together.

The reversals of fortune suffered by the family are then made more specific:

> This poem has been composed for Lady Prak, deprived of her husband, so that all of you, men and women alike, can listen and understand ... Once she had merit, riches, possessions. Now all that has been reversed, has changed, and she is poor and bereft.

"Misfortune," continues the poet, "is the essence of this poem":

> ... and as for fate, it's like being in the middle of the sea, with no islands and no shore in sight, with no one to help, with none of the images of life.

The narrative then begins, with the marriage of Lady Prak around 1800 to a high official name Narin. Her own background is not recorded. The poet gives a lavish description of their horses, elephants, carts, food, servants, and slaves, commenting that "in those days, officials were better equipped than they are now." Soon both receive titles and emblems of rank from the king (Chan, r. 1796–1835), for it is the king who bestows identities, and when he dies—as we shall see—these identities (and the merit they imply) become less efficacious.

In the second strophe, the couple's only child, a son named Meas, is born. Nourished by loving parents, he becomes "more beautiful than his father," "neither short not tall," with a "round, lovable face." His childhood passes peacefully, for King Chan, still meritorious, "watched over the border markers [*seima*] of the kingdom of Cambodia," presumably from his "sacred center" in Phnom Penh.[11]

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[11] For discussions of this notion, see Clifford Geertz, "Centres, Kings, and Charimsa," in *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils*, ed. J. Ben-David and T. C. Clark (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 172–46; Paul Mus, "Angkor in the Time of Javavarman VII," *Indian Art and Letters* XI,2 (1937): 65–75; and H. L. Shorto, "The Planets, the Days of the Week, and Points of the Compass: Orientation Symbols in 'Burma,'" in *Natural Symbols in Southeast Asia*, ed. G. B. Milner (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), pp. 152–64.

Then, in the year of the snake (i.e., AD 1833, the correct date), Siam launches an unexplained attack. Some officials flee into the fortress of Phnom Penh; others hurry off by boat to warn the "celestial king," i.e., the emperor of Vietnam, allegedly in Saigon. Chan himself, however, offers no resistance to the invasion and flees instead to seek refuge at the Vietnamese court, at Hue, where he tells the emperor, Minh Mang, of the attack. Minh Mang orders a military expedition into Cambodia. This part of the poem plays tricks with the historical record. The first is that the Vietnamese had in fact exercised informal control over the Cambodian capital since a Thai invasion of 1811–12; therefore, Meas and his parents would have had to acquiesce, at least once before, to Vietnamese protection.[12] Moreover, the Thai attack of 1833 is made to seem unprovoked, perhaps to throw people's sufferings (and their innocence) into relief, or to allow the poet to disapprove of an attack that did not include (as the 1841 invasion was to do) the restoration of a rightful king. In other chronicles, Chan orders resistance to the Thai before fleeing, but his ministers are unable to recruit any troops. Chan's flight into the Mekong Delta is confirmed in these sources, but his visit to Minh Mang is fictional and meant as a way of pointing to a culpable collaboration with the Vietnamese, who succeeded, in 1834, in driving a Thai army out of eastern Cambodia, as well as suggesting that Chan could speak as an equal with the emperor of Vietnam. The poet describes the sacking of Phnom Penh by this retreating Siamese army:

> They took everything away, and burned what had been people's houses, until not one of them remained; they took off everyone's possessions, masters' and slaves' alike, and they carried off all the people until not a man was left.[13]

When Chan returned to the devastated city in 1834, he asked the Vietnamese to rebuild it. The poem relates that the Vietnamese then dispatched middle-echelon officials, like Narin, to the countryside to build fortifications at the "doors of the country," using locally recruited labor.

Narin is sent to north-central Cambodia, to the region of Barai, astride a potential invasion route, and rather near Srolauv. Under the Vietnamese, the population there is mobilized to dig wells, ponds, "moats and canals," to raise fortifications, and to build granaries and gun emplacements:

> And all the officials, high and low, stayed close together. None of them resisted the Vietnamese—for they were afraid of them, and tried not to displease them. They ordered workers to build fortifications the way the Vietnamese wanted them, with pointed stockades around them.

The poet adds that the Vietnamese also "taught the people how to fight, how to make rifles, and how to use their knives in combat." All this, he says, was like a "meaningless game," and when workers were slow, the Vietnamese beat them "like cats, dogs, cows, or buffaloes."

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[12] Interestingly, Narin appears in a manuscript chronicle (P-30, Fonds École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Phnom Penh) as leading an anti-Thai expeditionary force in 1815.

[13] See also K. S. R. Kulap (pseud), *Anam Sayam yut* (Annam's War with Siam) (Bangkok: Rongphim Sayam, 1970), pp. 658–60.

After mentioning Chan's death in 1835 and the succession to the throne of his three daughters under Vietnamese control, the poet relates that the governor of Kompong Svay, who was probably Narin's patron, flees to Siam to be replaced by an official friendlier to the Vietnamese, who soon decides to

> capture all the Cambodian officials, high and low, and charge them with crimes. When the ordinary people heard this, they gathered together and said, "If they capture our leaders, we will have no one to honor and respect," but they were terrified of the Vietnamese, and far too scared to say anything in public.

In these lines, the necessity of hierarchy, as seen by underlings, is nicely put; it is echoed in other contemporary texts.[14] Another point to stress about the poet's description of events in Barai in the 1830s is that his statements and chronology could be verified by older members of his audience, who had lived through this period of Vietnamese control.

Although ordinary people are too frightened to act, the Vietnamese threat to capture the officials pushes some Cambodian officials into revolt.

They did not wait to be told to do so, but raised a military force, rapidly, crying out to their troops: "Kill all the Vietnamese. From Kandal to Stoung, kill them in their fortresses, until not one of them is left alive!"

To be effectively *recited*, a poem in Narin's memory, sponsored by his widow, and confined largely to a Buddhist frame of reference, must strike a balance between Narin's "correct" anti-Vietnamese feelings (the Vietnamese, after all, were thought of as unbelievers) and playing down his violent, unmeritorious acts. There is the problem of transmission, also, for the text was passed along, in the first instance, by being chanted at participants in some of the events which it relates. For this reason, the poet—himself a Buddhist monk—had to walk a fine line between accuracy and prettiness. Although we know from other sources, for example, that massacres of Vietnamese took place all over Cambodia in the late 1830s, the poet makes sure that the Vietnamese attack before the Cambodians are provoked. When Narin hears of this attack, he

> was unable to stay until the army came. He lost his head with fright; and so he ordered his (extended) family [*jat krou*], many of whom were elderly, to fill their ox carts with possessions and to leave at once.

In the scramble to leave, several carts are broken, and the family's possessions, including such manifestations of high status as gold and silver trays, spill out on the ground:

> That was the year of the cock (1837); in the year of the cock, everyone was frightened, and many possessions were lost forever, scattered along the roads and in the forest.

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[14] See, for example, those cited in Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French," p. 144.

The possessions are like the smoldering stick in the story about the birds. They are symbols of civilization, ways of expressing a frontier between the wild, undifferentiated world, and the world of hierarchies anchored in ritual and in the past. As the exiles move northwestward through unfamiliar, uncultivated land, they encounter many hardships. After several days on the edge of death, they push on, convinced that the Vietnamese are in pursuit:

> Their misery was great. There was no food at all, no fish, no rice, nothing normal to stave off their hunger; instead they dug for lizards, without pausing to think, or be guilty about it; they simply did it together. They hunted *saom* roots in the depths of the forest, and other roots as well to make into a kind of soup; there was no fish—no fish-paste, nothing to make food palatable. They ate like this until their hunger went away, but it was hard to swallow the food; they sat silently beside the road, intensely poor, and miserable.

This passage reiterates the themes of brutalization and reversal which permeate the poem, but softens and ennobles them somewhat by casting them into metered verse that links these hardships and wanderings in the forest to those of characters *in other poems*, like Prince Rama, for example.[15]

On the frontier of Siam, the caravan encounters some Thai officials (*kha luong*) who "take pity" on them, and give them some provisions. Narin goes alone to Bangkok to pay homage to King Rama III (r. 1824–1851), the patron of Chan's self-exiled brother, Prince Duang, who has lived in Bangkok under Thai protection since 1812. Rama III questions Narin about his voyage and restores his rank (while perhaps deflecting his loyalties somewhat) by presenting him with gold and silver trays, bowls, goblets, and lengths of patterned silk.

Interestingly, many of these emblems of rank are connected with ceremonial consumption of food or betel. Emblems of rank in Vietnam, on the other hand, were often such things as seals of office and paper on which to write decrees.[16] By paying homage to the only Buddhist monarch accessible to him, Narin regains his "rightful" position in the world; however, in another reversal still, he dies as soon as he gets back to his family, in the forest, far from home, as if lacking merit in some way.

In a strophe given over to Lady Prak's mourning for him, she regrets that she is so far from home "where possessions, riches, and rank would make it easy to celebrate [a funeral] while it is so difficult here." And she continues:

> Now all families, as they live out their lives, grow sick, die, and disappear, losing to misfortune, as if on the slope of a hill. Some die as children, some as brothers

[15] See Saveros Pou, trans., *Ramakerti* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1977), and Pou, *Etude sur Ramakerti* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1977). Wandering in the forest is a feature of many Cambodian folktales and of Javanese *wayang* theater. The family's peregrinations, then, might be seen as an example of life imitating art.

[16] Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French," p. 81. For Thai parallels, see Lorraine Gesick, *Kingship and Political Integration in Traditional Siam, 1767–1824* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1976), especially pp. 48 and 112ff. Some of the emblems of office were in use as early as the tenth century AD: cf. G. Cœdès, ed., *Les Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 4 (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1957), p. 181.

> and sisters, and indeed all of us must die, husbands and wives as well, weakened with suffering and fever.

The linking of propriety/property recurs often in the poem; part of the widow's sadness on the frontier is that her husband's merit has become so ineffectual so soon. Nonetheless, a suitable funeral ceremony takes place, with Brahmins (*youki*) on hand to officiate, as well as Buddhist monks. Hearing of the family's plight from officials in the region, Rama III allows them to "settle and grow rice" (or, presumably, have rice grown for them) along the frontier.

The poet then shifts his focus to the Vietnamese zone of occupation which, "after the family had left, [became] unhappy." Vietnamese and Vietnamese-sponsored Cambodian armies, he tells us, scour the countryside, hunting down the people who had been killing Vietnamese. Reaching north-central Cambodia, the troops find only "people cowering in the forest"—a chilling premonition of events in 1979 and 1980. Many of these are brought back and imprisoned, presumably in villages, to the number of "one hundred thousand men." The poet goes on to describe Vietnamese punishments and tortures in detail.[17] At precisely this point, the Vietnamese (1841, according to other sources) arrest the princesses and the highest-ranking Cambodian officials in Phnom Penh:

> The officials (who remained at liberty) and the people pondered together, and decided to raise troops and kill the Vietnamese, so that the Vietnamese wouldn't be able to capture and kill them at first; for if they did, Cambodia would no longer exist.

The phrase "pondered together" (*kut knea*) in the passage should not suggest democratic procedures so much as a community of interest and a sense of oppression shared between "high" and "low" members of society, especially at this time.

Once again, what pulls Cambodians into concerted action is the fear that upper ranks in the society, which defined the others, had been eliminated by unbelievers and that, therefore, Cambodia—as a set of hierarchical arrangements—"would no longer exist." Being "wild" meant having no one to respect, or to look down on; orderliness had been destroyed by foreigners and violence, perhaps, was at last permissible, to restore it.

In forming a notion of what Cambodia "was," regalia, and especially the king's sword (*preah khan*), always played an important part, right up to 1975. Similarly, possessions indicative of status—such as umbrellas, betel-boxes, or gold and silver trays—play an important part in the poem. In some ways, they seem to have been more important than any duties an official was expected to perform. Duties, in fact, aren't mentioned in the poem, which focuses instead on shifts in status, fortune, and patronage, which is to say, in *merit* as observed by others. The poet suggests, indeed, that there is a close connection between power and possessions, which aren't merely symbols of merit, but proofs or manifestations of it. A linkage like this is not unusual

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[17] These include salting open wounds, burying alive, eye-gouging, and so on. The ensemble of these tortures passed into Cambodian folklore and history; see Eng Sut, *Akkasar mahaboros khmaer* (Documents about Cambodian Heroes) (Phnom Penh: n.p., 1969), pp. 1214–16. Interestingly, the passage describing torture is one which this version shares with the published verse chronicle about this period (see note 10, above), whether accurate or not.

in a society which places such emphasis on rank differentials and the difference between haves and have-nots; the Cambodian word for "rich," indeed, means primarily "have." The haves, in other words, had to be seen (by the have-nots) amidst their numerous possessions.[18]

The poet skims over the war that raged in Cambodia in the early 1840s, choosing instead to stress the restorative aspects of the reign of King Duang, who returned to the former capital of Udong with a Thai army in 1841 and was crowned king after protracted Thai-Vietnamese fighting and negotiations in 1847.

What Rama III had done for Narin, by presenting him with regalia, Duang now performs for Cambodia as a whole. Reimposing propriety, he brings the kingdom back to life—blotting out the troubles that had occurred. Like the Thai monarch Rama I's refashioning of Ayudhya in the new city of Bangkok in the 1780s, Duang fastidiously restores his father's capital in Udong. The passage in the poem describing the restoration resembles one in the chronicles that describes similar work, by Duang's father, coming back from exile in Siam in 1794.[19] Duang's own return, of course, was vivid to listeners to the poem.[20] A point to stress is the contrast between the harmony, propriety, and elegance of his actions and the homelessness, barbarism, and the loss of status described in earlier strophes.

After Duang's coronation, the refugees along the frontier gradually drift home. Meas, his mother, and their followers hurry to Srolauv with their possessions, their ox-carts making the noise *kokik kokok*. They are welcomed back by local people. Meas orders them to build him a new house. When this is finished, he frets about his lack of rank:

> "I am destitute," he thought. "I am too poor; and as this is true, I should consider offering myself [to the king] as a slave. My father used to be important; he had honor and high rank, but that has vanished. I must go and become a slave to the king."

The audience would not take Meas's allegation of poverty very seriously, sitting outside a gilded *wat* constructed by his mother. But to Meas himself, the fact that he lacked an identity bestowed by the king meant that he was impoverished, in terms of merit, and perhaps in terms of an entourage, or at least entitlement to it, as well.[21]

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[18] This notion of visible merit (*bun*) leads us back to the idea of regalia (including chronicles) which are hidden away, polished, added to, and passed along through time. Chronicles, like merit, are additive; the notion of personal transformation is lacking from them. See Shelly Errington, "Some Comments on Style in the Meanings of the Past," *Journal of Asian Studies* 38,2 (1979): 231–44.

[19] Eng Sut, *Akkasar*, pp. 1012–13.

[20] Inscription K. 142 (Cœdès's classification). See E. Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1900), pp. 349–51. See also Lunet de Lajonquiere, *Inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1910), p. 208.

[21] Cf. the words of the Sunan of Surakarta (1788–1820), quoted in Soemarsaid Moertono, *State and Statecraft in Old Java* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1968; repr. 1974), p. 94: "There is nothing to be compared with serving the king; he will see the king's courtyard and will be respected and have a name (in society) ... ; serving can be likened to debris drifting in the ocean, going wherever it is commanded to."

His departure gives the poet, *via* Lady Prak, the opportunity for an aria about the perils of living in the city (which few in the audience would have visited); but Meas persists, and sets off by boat for Udong.

He soon attracts the attention of the king, because he acts like a "true servant, who never does anything improper," probably—although the text is unclear about it—as some sort of page at court.

Returning to Srolauv, he courts the daughter of a governor, impressing her parents with his "ancient pedigree," his merit, and his ability to arrange ceremonies "according to old traditions." His brief separation from his bride-to-be (who was probably in view during the recitation of the poem) allows the poet to spin and embroider stanzas of advice to her, stressing the importance of obedience to her husband. When she joins Meas in Srolauv, she finds him "worried sick" that he might be recalled to Udong, away from his village, his mother, and his wife. Satisfied with his new rank, he has become fearful of Duang; for the main purpose of his visit, it seems, had been to have a rank bestowed on him with which he can lead his easy life.

Soon after he returns home with his wife, i.e., just as his merit is established, Lady Prak complains to him that she lacks proper offerings *(borikkha)* to present to local monks. Meas, "intelligent and understanding of his mother's heart," offers to go back to Udong to procure them for her. His mother tries to dissuade him but she fails, and he leaves for the capital by canoe. After buying the offerings, he sets off for Srolauv. However,

> when they reached Thkoub Island, he was stricken ill, and then got worse. He tried to stay conscious, and the servants in the canoe tried to row faster; but his fate was very near, his illness was too heavy. He tried to think of life; then he couldn't think of life; his life was over.

Meas dies as his father had done, on his way home from performing what seems to have been a meritorious act. Why, asks the poet, was it his fate to "die in the middle of the forest, like a poor man in a far-off land?"

Here again we encounter the contrast between wilderness, animality, poverty, anonymity, and loneliness, on the one hand, and villages, cultivation, sociability, and bestowed identities, on the other. Just as girls are not supposed to turn into birds, meritorious people are not supposed to die like ordinary men—i.e., unexpectedly, like the people listening to the poem—although they often do. In nineteenth-century Cambodia, the frontier between the two was not especially sharp; people in the audience had crossed it, and come back, more than once, just as the *kaun lok* do.

The strophes that follow are given over to laments of Lady Prak and her daughter-in-law, who feels as if "life has been beaten from her body." Lady Prak declares:

> O favorite son, when you were born I nourished you, gently, gently, and lay beside you, and embraced you, so that no powdery dust could touch you; no one allowed you to be sad or to cry from hunger. Oh why did you die in the forest, while you were still so young?

The remainder of the poem, perhaps a hundred and fifty lines, deals with Meas's cremation, his mother's mourning, and the construction of Wat Srolauv. The poet recounts that work began on the construction in 1851, and continued, on a part-time basis, alternating with work in the fields, until 1855. One problem mentioned by the poet is the shortage of able-bodied men; another is the scarcity of decorations, like gilded mirrors and gold leaf. At each stage of the construction, festivals take place; at the most recent of these, Lady Prak recites a long prayer, addressed to the Buddha image of the *wat*, offering up the *wat* itself in exchange for assurances of salvation. The poet describes the levels of hell to which people are consigned when they lack merit and "act like crazy pigs," comparing this to the behavior of the patrons of the poem who, by constructing a *wat* (and, perhaps, by allowing history to be recited) have a meritorious future for themselves.

The recitation of the poem, in fact, like the construction of the *wat*, is at once a celebration of hierarchy and sociability: hierarchy by means of the values expressed, and the elegance which expresses them, and sociability because the people listening to the poem are also the ones who built the *wat*, and thus partake of these two kinds of elegance. Similarly, the recitation of tales that are "about" the boundary between the forest and the field is, in a sense, to *mark off* the boundary, as we listen together to the stories.

The three texts that I have discussed suggest that there were two contrasting perceptions of moral order in early nineteenth-century Cambodia. They were not, as one might expect, perceptions on the part of those in power *versus* perceptions of the powerless, or perceptions of people who could read *versus* those of people who could not.[22] Rather, there was a moral order for everyone—or at least those reachable by texts of this kind—based on prescription, memorization, and teaching, largely Buddhist in orientation, on the one hand, and perceptions rooted in the real world, on the other. The first was a celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good. The second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on.

Some Cambodian literature, like epic poetry or the Tmenh Chey cycle (a picaresque novel about a rogue), can be seen as primarily idealistic, or primarily profane, either sanctifying or overturning the meritoriousness of power. People called on these forms of discourse not only when they were told to, by the elite, but also on their own, to relieve the pain that came from living in the world. They could escape the world for an evening by following Rama into an enchanted forest, or they could overturn it, momentarily, by hearing how Tmenh Chey outwitted kings, ministers, and even the Chinese. But there was no real escape from the world outside the stories, a world which, in many ways, these two extreme forms of literature failed to address.

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[22] For a discussion of the issue, see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), especially chapters 1–3. See also Kathleen Gough, "Implication of Literacy in Traditional China and India," and Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1968). For Asian references to this general theme, see Madeleine Biardeau, "Théories du Langage en Inde," in Julia Kristeva, et al., *La Traversée des Signes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975); and also S. J. Tambiah, "Literacy in a Buddhist Village in Northeast Thailand" in Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, pp. 85–131.

The texts I have chosen, on the other hand, exemplify tensions and overlappings between these two extremes, and between two ways of looking at the question of moral order. They describe the gaps that open between what ought to happen in the world, what often happens, and the "normal." Thus the girls, though good, change into animals; the crocodile, although loyal, is destroyed. Narin honors a monarch, and Meas his mother. In the course of doing so, both of them are stricken dead. Similarly, people listening to the poem, who had hidden in the forest like animals in the 1830s, are now celebrating around a new *wat*, glittering with mirrors and shimmering gold leaf. There is poetic justice here, as there is for the girls, who as birds remember their humanity, and for Lady Prak, who asks for merit on a bereaved occasion, and is granted it, if not perceptibly by "heaven," by the people who have worked on her behalf and have now gathered to celebrate their work with her.

In spite of momentary triumphs, poetic justice, or moments of shared intensity (as when listening, together, to poems and music), the world of nineteenth-century Cambodia was a desperate, cacophonous place. People had no explanations for suffering that would allow any but the magically endowed to overcome it; they had no explanation for justice that led them to question the propriety of exploitation. They had practical explanations for injustice, and Buddhist ones as well: a tiger is bigger than a king; King Chan's lack of merit brought misery to his people. These explanations fitted some of the facts, but not as many as the texts I have discussed. In a sense, the texts "answer" questions that no one dared to ask, but in the end, what do they *explain*? No more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on,[23] the time *entre chien et loup*. Certainly neither the poet nor the characters in the poem saw themselves as acting out roles in an historical process; for at this time, as George Steiner suggests in another context, "All human beings were subject to general disorder or exploitation as they were to disease. But these swept over them with tidal mystery."[24]

Hierarchies and those who inhabit them—like the characters in the poem—are oriented to the past, when things were not so bad, and so are perceptions of the moral order that hesitate, as these perceptions do, in the presence of revolutionary change. The idea that bestowed identities as an official, for example, or a Buddhist monk kept the wilderness at bay for the "haves" at least, was widely held in

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[23] I have borrowed this image from a lovely passage in Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), p. 267: "My own image for the achievements of Baktaman understanding and codification is provided by the concrete symbol of their own dance evenings. Occasionally, a score or two of adults and youths will come together at night, aided by torches and a partly overcast moon. They dress in their finery, including cassowary-feathers for the seniors, dance to their sacred drums, and sing their songs of love and violence, thereby shaping the whole scene in complex cultural imagery, positively intoxicating themselves with the force and vitality of their own expression. But if you move a hundred metres along one of their paths, you find yourself outside this circle of cultural imagery; and through the trees you glimpse a panorama of immense, untouched forest-covered landscape, dwarfing man's tiny village clearing and muting his tiny noise. The command which the Baktaman achieve over their situation is, as for all of us, at best a subjective command only, asserted in those limited sectors where their awareness asserts itself. And in creating this awareness, the symbols fashioned in their rites are both their main beacons and their tools."

[24] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 19. It is illuminating to note, in closing, that the Javanese word for "chronicle" (*babad*) derives from the verb that means "to clear a wilderness." See Peter Carey, *The Cultural Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century Java* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974), p. 4.

nineteenth-century Cambodia. But when hierarchies break down, spilling onto the roads of the forest like gold and silver trays, and when a society, like Cambodia's in the 1830s, 1840s, and the 1970s, appeared to have come to an end, where does one look for explanations?

PART I

GAPS IN THE WORLD

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GAPS IN THE WORLD: HARM AND VIOLENCE IN KHMER BUDDHIST NARRATIVE*

Anne Ruth Hansen

While my well-worn, "Post-it"-filled copy of David Chandler's *History of Cambodia* always sits within easy reference reach on the windowsill next to my computer, enabling me to write about Cambodian history, it is Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts" to which I return as a starting point for understanding *how* to write history.[1] The essay is provocative not only because of its historical depth but also because it is one of those rare works that is both conceptually and methodologically emboldening. Chandler examines Khmer conceptions of order by exploring the "...gaps that open between what ought to happen in the world, what often happens, and the 'normal.'"[2] The texts he analyzes—a chronicle and two folk stories—suggest not just a single Khmer view of order, but overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations of order, harmony, and the "...attempt to survive inside the framework of what occasionally went on."[3] In other words, in the essay Chandler takes on problems of disorder or what is *not* supposed to happen: parents abandoning their children, meritorious people dying, suffering, betrayal, injustice, violence, war. He also considers and tries to document historically the emotional ethos of a time, the violence in nineteenth-century Cambodia. Finally, he utilizes *narrative* as the archive

* This paper was originally written for a 2001 AAS panel focused on the contributions of David Chandler to Khmer Studies. It has since benefited from comments and collaborative research with Judy Ledgerwood. Parts of this essay form an earlier version of chapter two in my *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). Abbreviations used in these notes: K = Khmer; P = Pali.

[1] David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 3rd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), and "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), pp. 53–77.

[2] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 72.

[3] Ibid., p. 71.

of an emotionally and politically tumultuous period. The narrative texts that Chandler uses in the essay allow these various tensions to emerge because they are not trying to chronicle historical events, but rather to respond to the historical experiences and emotions associated with these gaps between "what ought to happen" and what does.

In this essay, I attempt to build on the historical, ethical, and methodological questions raised in Chandler's essay. As a historian of religion, I am interested in the different ways in which—in different historical moments—Buddhists have drawn on their religious ideas to understand events in the world, to generate new or reinterpreted values, and to enact these values as strategies for living in a disorderly and sometimes disheartening world. The turbulent history of modern Cambodia has moved from intra-Southeast Asian warfare, slavery, millenarianism, and colonial rule to the post-independence turmoil of the Vietnam War, Democratic Kampuchea, and the difficult civil violence and reconstruction the country has undergone since 1979. For scholars who draw on a range of conventional historical sources, it is a laborious though relatively straightforward task to document this succession of events in sociopolitical historical terms—but much more difficult to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of what these experiences have meant to the people who survived them, and what they mean, in a larger human sense, for our comprehension of violence and its causes.

A memoir composed by Ta Meas around the turn of the twentieth century, for example, offers rare, firsthand glimpses of the experience and effects of warfare in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Born in 1828 in Longvek as the son of a local official, Meas describes growing up in the midst of warfare. As a child, he lost his grandfather, parents, brothers, and uncles to wars against the Vietnamese, and his grandmother was abducted as a prisoner of war by the Siamese. By 1848, he recalls,

> The country was shattered. In each village, [people] struggled to find income but could not. None of the rice farms or garden crops had been planted because everyone was too afraid of the Vietnamese and Siamese soldiers who would come into the rice fields. ... In Longvek ... where there had once been 150 houses, now there were just 60 or 50 or 25 left and the population was much smaller than before. ... Entire villages were devastated, abandoned, deathly quiet. It was sorrowful and heart wrenching beyond description seeing the misery of widows with tiny children, their heads resting in their laps, whom they were powerless to feed.
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> ... I myself was very poor, without any family. ... I knew only suffering and misery and my heart was broken. I wanted to ordain in the discipleship of the Lord Buddha in a *wat* in the town of Oudong in order to have merit for my next life, ... to learn the purity of the Dhamma [the teachings of the Buddha] and also to rid myself of impurity.[4]

The wars that claimed much of Ta Meas's family and that led him to become ordained for a while as a Buddhist monk were followed by a brief period of calm during the reign of King Ang Duong—to be followed by almost continuous

[4] Ta Meas, *Reuang Ta Meas*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Rare Books), 1908 (?), pp. 4–7.

outbreaks of fighting and unrest for the rest of the century. Meas's memories point to a Buddhist response to violence, an impetus to take ordination, to make merit, and to purify the self, but fall short of giving us an insider's perspective on how and why merit-making and individual purification work to effect healing for a victim of violence. To examine these issues requires a different kind of historical archive, one that helps us to better understand how the lived experience of order and disorder are perceived and interpreted.

The problem of what ought *not* to happen that Chandler has raised in his "Songs" essay seems to me to beg the prior question: how, according to Khmer Buddhists, does such evil, harm, violence, and suffering arise? Human beings can be seen as ultimately perfectable, purifiable beings, a potential that is most conspicuously evidenced in the Cambodian religious context by the well-known biography of the Buddha. Given the ubiquity of this model for moral development, how then have Khmer Buddhists understood the human propensity toward the opposite—toward the development *not* of purity but of violence and harm? Using Chandler's essay as a methodological springboard, my paper analyzes two very different Buddhist narrative accounts of the origin and cessation of violence and harm, which I suggest provide us with a deeper view of how Khmer during this period interpreted historical experiences of violence. After offering a brief historical chronology of harm and warfare in nineteenth-century Cambodia, I examine this question by considering, first, a Khmer vernacular version of a Buddhist legend about history, and then a story about the birth of harm and violence drawn from a vernacular Buddhist ethics manual.

I conclude by taking up the methodological question of using narrative as a source for historically understanding questions of meaning, exploring the question not just of how but also *why* narrative can effectively function in this manner. This exploration of meaning and narrative concerns the interpretation of violence and its causes in a particular Khmer historical context. But since I have been emboldened by the kinds of reasons and questions that I think David Chandler has wanted to explore as a historian— "... when a society, like Cambodia's in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1970s, appears to have come to an end, where does one look for explanations?"[5]—this analysis also tries to offer a Khmer Buddhist response to the problems that perplex us as human beings.

I argue that in these Khmer narrative analyses of violence and harm, the Buddhist moral vision is one in which human beings construct the "world" through the overlapping reverberations of their actions, speech, and thoughts. The moral nature of the world, whether pure or impure, is causally determined by and derived from the individual and collective natures of human beings. Similarly, narrative—through the device of emplotment—creates a literary "world" that derives its logic and meaning from a causally connected sequence of events that effects transformations in the intertwined lives of the characters that people that world. Thus, as these narratives suggest, drawing on Dominick LaCapra's terms, narrative is not simply useful as a "documentary" historical source for understanding turn-of-the-century conceptions of harm and evil, although it serves that valuable purpose as well.[6] But if we focus on the "work-like" qualities of narrative, then we can see how

[5] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 73.

[6] Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 25.

it was meant to "work" on individuals, to transform them, change their perspectives, and help them develop, in this case, as moral agents. This gives us a deeper and more active understanding of how Cambodians a century ago struggled with understanding evil and suffering and how and why these Buddhist narratives and the ones Chandler considers in his essay continue to be relevant both as historical and religious sources.

WARFARE

Much of the precariousness of Khmer life in the early part of the nineteenth century—graphically referred to by one British diplomat as the "dismembering of Kamboja"—was the legacy of its geographical situation between the two rival powers of Siam and Vietnam.[7] The chronology of these events has been assembled and narrated elsewhere, notably in work by David Chandler, Milton Osborne, and John Tully, and it is not necessary here to give more than the barest outline of this history.[8] The nineteenth century in Cambodia opened with warfare precipitated by both Siamese and Vietnamese efforts to keep Cambodia as a vassal state, following the traditional Southeast Asian mode of political patronage. By the early 1800s, the Vietnamese had begun to exert quasi-colonial control in the southern and eastern regions of Cambodia, attempting to introduce Vietnamese administrative models, agricultural methods, and cultural forms to the Khmer.[9] Khmer resistance to these reforms led to uprisings beginning in 1836, as well as larger anti-Vietnamese rebellions in 1837–1839 and 1840–1841. Throughout the 1840s, warfare continued between Siamese and Vietnamese forces, with neither army able to take decisive control of the Khmer capital in Phnom Penh.[10] Finally, treaty negotiations between the Siamese and Vietnamese resulted in an agreement that the Khmer king would send annual tributes to both kingdoms.[11] In 1848, King Ang Duong was placed on the Khmer throne with Siamese support, and until his death in 1860, managed to usher in a period of relative calm and social restoration.[12]

The constant wars of the period, fought with armies raised by the provincial ministers and officials, caused massive destruction in many regions of Cambodia. Entire populations fled into the forest or were captured as prisoners of war and

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[7] John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (London: Oxford University Press, [1828] 1967), p. 447.

[8] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, pp. 117–47; David Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 45–135; Milton E. Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response (1859–1905)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969); John Tully, *Cambodia under the Tricolour: King Sisowath and the "Mission Civilisatrice," 1904–1927*, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 37 (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1996); and John Tully, *France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863–1953* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

[9] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, pp. 123–32; Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge entre le Siam et le Viêtnam (de 1775 à 1860)* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991), pp. 78–98; Adhémard Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1914), pp. 406–29; Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy*, p. 447.

[10] Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, pp. 132–36; Milton Osborne and David Wyatt, "The Abridged Cambodian Chronicle," *France-Asie* 193,2 (1968): 199–200.

[11] Osborne and Wyatt, "Abridged Cambodian Chronicle," p. 200.

[12] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 100–118.

forcibly relocated with the conquering armies, the survivors destined for slavery. The Ta Meas memoir (cited above) and the 1856 Wat Srolauv chronicle Chandler examines in his "Songs" essay give a clear indication of the high toll in human suffering that these relocations engendered.[13] They are corroborated by mid-century Thai, French, and British sources whose different descriptions of slave capture bear enough similarity to add convincingly to our understanding of what warfare was like.[14] In his 1821–1822 journal of diplomatic visits to Siam and Cochinchina, for instance, John Crawfurd writes of the Siamese:

> ... [T]heir wars are conducted with odious ferocity. Prisoners of rank are decapitated, and those of the lower orders condemned to perpetual slavery, and labour in chains. The peasantry of an invaded country, armed or unarmed, men, women, and children, are indiscriminately carried off into captivity, and the seizure of these unfortunate persons appears to be the principal object of the periodical incursions which are made into an enemy's territory.[15]

In 1834, a French priest named Father Régereau described the capture of Khmer prisoners by Siamese troops:

> The manner in which the Siamese make war is to seize all of the property that they encounter, to destroy and set fire to all of the places through which they pass, to take prisoners and slaves, ordinarily killing the men and seizing the women and children. ... If during the journey they [the prisoners] cannot march further, they strike them, they maltreat them, they kill them, insensitive to their weeping and moaning, without pity they massacre the little children in sight of their mothers.[16]

The French civil servant and mapper August Pavie recorded what he described as an oral account of a forced march from Khmer captives he encountered in a Siamese village later in the century:

> Taken away from our fields under the pretext of war, we have lost everything by forced abandonment, by pillage: harvests, elephants, horses, cattle, all our belongings. Carried away here, marching for long weeks, all day, all night, receiving blows, without rice, we have left the majority of our elders, and

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[13] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," pp. 59–70.

[14] Katherine A. Bowie, "Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand: Archival Anecdotes and Village Voices," in *State Power and Culture in Thailand*, ed. E. Paul Durrenberger (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1996), pp. 114–26.

[15] Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy*, p. 347. Terwiel notes that heightened military activity by Siam on its borders beginning at the end of the eighteenth century seems to have resulted in a corresponding increase in Siam of the number of *chaloei*, the type of "absolute slaves" captured as prisoners of war who were unable to buy their freedom and whose descendents were also absolute slaves. Rama I instituted a legal change in 1805 that allowed slaves of this type to redeem themselves by reimbursing their owners for their services. B. Terwiel, "Bondage and Slavery in Early Nineteenth-Century Siam," in *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 131–32.

[16] Translated from Khin Sok, *Cambodge entre le Siam et le Viêtnam*, p. 239.

> likewise our children, dying or dead on the forest paths, without power to ease their dying misery, or to honor their remains.[17]

These and other accounts contribute to our understanding of what Chandler has described as the "... desperate, cacophonous" world of nineteenth-century Cambodia.[18]

The period extending from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth involved not only the devastation of warfare and instability, but also significant sociopolitical changes throughout the region. In Cambodia, French protectorate rule commenced in 1863, and for the rest of the century imperial efforts to rule through the indirect agency of Ang Duong's son King Norodom met with uprisings as well as more covert forms of malcontent reflected in millenarian thought (which I will discuss shortly). Beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration attempted to consolidate further its political and civil authority by wresting power from Khmer elites through the introduction of administrative reforms that allowed the French greater control of taxes and labor resources in the kingdom. A crisis occurred during the 1880s, when violence enveloped much of the country as King Norodom's brother, Prince Sivotha, led a guerrilla-style insurrection against the throne and the French military, attacking garrisons and burning telegraph offices and French-franchised liquor and opium stores in provincial cities. This rebellion was finally suppressed, not so much by the efforts of the French military but through secret negotiations with Norodom, and also in part through the intervention of a highly venerated Buddhist leader, Preah Sukon Ban (or Pan),[19] Prince Sivotha's own preceptor and teacher, who apparently interceded by asking Sivotha to surrender his arms and take ordination as a Buddhist monk.[20]

By the turn of the century, the French-initiated reforms in state, regional, and local governance were starting to make themselves evident in daily life at all levels of society, felt through: the legal prohibition of slavery, changes in tax collection that led to the 1916 protests and the murder of a French provincial administrator in 1925; oppressive corvée labor requirements for the construction of colonial infrastructure projects, such as the opulent French sanatorium and resort Bokor; and increased domestic surveillance and control over the Sangha. These changes were accompanied by unprecedented social problems, such as a steady rise in the level of opium use and addiction, as well as continuing banditry and the periodic flare-ups of Buddhist millenarian dissent that had been a source of unrest since the 1820s.[21]

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[17] August Pavie, *Mission Pavie Indo-chine, 1879–1895*, vol. I (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898), p. xx. Pavie does not give a date or location for this encounter, nor detail the events that led to the capture of the Khmer prisoners from this village. He describes other such encounters and warfare that he himself witnessed in August Pavie, *Au Pays des Millions d'Élephants et du Parasol Blanc (à la Conquête des Coeurs)* (Rennes: Terres de Brume Éditions, 1995), p. 68 (for example). For other accounts, see Khin Sok, *Cambodge entre le Siam et le Viêtnam*, pp. 239, 269; and Bowie, "Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand," pp. 114–26.

[18] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 72.

[19] Also transliterated as Braḥ Sugandhādhipatī Pān.

[20] Osborne, *The French Presence*, pp. 212–29; Tully, *France on the Mekong*, pp. 84–93.

[21] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 61–75, 139–58; and Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, pp. 142–48, 153–59; Tully, *France on the Mekong*, pp. 135–90, 294–304; Hansen, *How to Behave*, pp. 54–68, 111–19.

MILLENARIAN VIOLENCE

Modern forms of militant Buddhist millenarianism appear to have emerged in Cambodia as early as 1820, eventually spreading from the delta region and southern and central Cambodia northward, to Battambang and the Lao–Siamese border. Scholars have suggested that the rebellions that took place in this period can be viewed as intertwined moral, religious, and political responses by the populace to such economic and political factors as the centralization of governmental authority, new modes of administration, taxation reform, cholera epidemics, and colonial rule occurring throughout the region. They were generally led by charismatic religious leaders termed *neak mean bon* in Khmer, "those possessing merit," whose religious authority was linked to prophecies and Buddhist texts predicting the arrival of the next Buddha, Maitreya, an event that would be preceded by the appearance of a *cakkavattin*-type righteous ruler who would usher in the future Buddha's epoch.[22]

The millenarian movements, which developed particularly in areas under colonial control, asserted the image of what things should be—but were not. They expressed a perception of disorder and disharmony, suggesting that the moral ordering of the realm was out of joint and the king was not fulfilling his role as moral fulcrum of the kingdom. Nineteenth-century millenarianism reflected hierarchical and cosmological assumptions about space and power that linked individual social standing and circumstances in life at least in part to one's moral virtue and religious practice in past lives. A popular Khmer poem from the period ("*Chbap Tounmean Khluon*") explains:

> The wealth you have is commensurate
> to your generosity in previous lives;
> now having taken birth in this life,
> your wealth is determined by past cause.
>
> If you have a high position,
> possessing wealth and slaves,[23]
> keep your thoughts aimed at what is upright
> and in futures lives, you will obtain them again.[24]

To become a king, one's moral standing from previous lives must have been obviously high. Yet to be king also involved the promulgation of benefit—of merit—for the whole kingdom, largely through acts that promoted religion such as building temples and collecting Buddhist texts, acts that were moral imperatives besides being politically wise.[25] Kingship in Theravadin Southeast Asia, influenced by the

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[22] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, p. 61. Buddhist iconography suggests the presence of politicized Maitreya cults much earlier, documented for example in Ashley Thompson, "The Future of Cambodia's Past: A Messianic Middle-Period Cambodian Royal Cult," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), pp. 13–39.

[23] That is, debt slaves and hereditary slaves. See Saveros Pou, *Guirlande de Cpāp'*, vols. 1–2 (Paris: Cedoreck, 1988), pp. 330–31, n. 23.

[24] Ibid., pp. 66, 316–17.

[25] Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 100–118.

Buddhist ideal of the *cakkavattin* or righteous ruler, necessitated that the king act as the moral as well as political center of the kingdom.

In Chandler's analysis, millenarianism apparently gained its first nineteenth-century expression in connection with anti-Vietnamese revolts in southeastern Cambodia during the 1820s and 30s, probably in response to oppressive treatment of Khmer workers forced to excavate canals.[26] It reemerged next in the form of the Buu Son Ky Huong religion during the 1849 cholera epidemic in southern Vietnam, when a millenarian healer called the Buddha Master of Western Peace began to attract adherents, including ethnic Khmer, who followed him to the mountainous region of Chaudoc (between southern Vietnam and southeastern Cambodia) to establish new communities. Based on sixteenth-century Vietnamese predictive texts, the Buddha Master preached the imminent arrival of the Buddha Maitreya. According to his teachings, the degeneration of the Buddha's teachings, the Dhamma, had nearly reached the point of apocalypse, an event foreshadowed by the cholera epidemic and harsh conditions of frontier life. Only those who purified themselves through proper moral action would escape the coming violence and be reborn at the time of Maitreya.[27]

In Vietnam, related movements continued to flare up periodically over the next decades, becoming increasingly intertwined with anticolonial activities. Although the Buddha Master of Western Peace died in 1856, various figures claiming to be his reincarnation continued to emerge and promulgate aspects of his doctrine. On the Khmer side of the border, a Khmer monk or ex-monk calling himself Poukambo,[28] who claimed to be the righteous ruler, or *thommik,* foretold in millenarian narratives, began to rally peasants to revolt against oppressive taxation policies during the 1860s. With the French now in power in Saigon and providing the military might to support King Norodom's tenuous reign in Phnom Penh, Poukambo joined forces with Vietnamese rebels in a series of raids and revolts against French military outposts fueled by unrest over taxation and focused by Poukambo's millenarian claims to the throne.[29] Poukambo's forces also attacked Catholic settlements, killing a French priest,[30] and ransacked villages that failed to join the rebellion.[31]

Poukambo's prophetic appeal to peasants in an environment already heavily influenced by Vietnamese millenarianism seems self-evident. In political terms, the Poukambo rebellion developed during a period of intense unpopularity for the Khmer king, Norodom, as he restructured taxation to increase revenues—taxes that

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[26] Ibid., pp. 61–75.

[27] Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 27–33.

[28] Also transliterated as "Borka·por," "Pokambo," or "Pu-Kombo."

[29] Leclère, *Histoire,* p. 457 ff.; Paul Collard, *Cambodge et Cambodgiens* (Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes, et Colonials, 1925), pp. 81–82; Guy Porée and Éveline Porée-Maspero, *Moeurs et Coutumes des Khmères* (Paris: Payot, 1938), pp. 49–52; V. M. Reddi, *A History of the Cambodian Independence Movement, 1863–1955* (Tirupati: Sri Venkateswara University, 1970), pp. 33–39; Jean Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge,* vol. 1 (Paris: Libraire de la Société Asiatique de l'École des Langues Orientales Vivantes, 1883), pp. 159–71. Moura's history is a translation from the Cambodian Royal Chronicles.

[30] Penny Edwards, "Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1999), p. 265.

[31] Osborne, *The French Presence,* p. 187.

Poukambo apparently promised to rescind.[32] Along with inciting refusal to pay taxes, Poukambo and his followers fomented general unrest and violence in the countryside. In spite of their crude weapons, Poukambo's army of rebels were bolstered by their guerrilla techniques, the confidence drawn from their spells of invulnerability, and the malaria and other illnesses that were killing off large numbers of French troops fighting in treacherous mountain and jungle terrain. They managed to oppose French and Khmer troops for two years, spreading the rebellion and attacking French military strongholds, until Poukambo was finally captured.[33] His severed head was sent to Phnom Penh for display in order to persuade the populace that this supposedly invulnerable leader had been apprehended and decapitated through French military power.[34]

Although none would ever be as effective or widespread as Poukambo's movement, millenarian rebellions with the same outlines occurred again and again throughout the rest of the century. Another millenarian-inspired claimant to the Khmer throne, a former slave named Sva,[35] led a rebellion throughout southwestern Cambodia and the Vietnamese border region during the 1860s until his capture by French authorities.[36] On the margins of the Sivotha insurrection and the resulting chaos that ensued, a number of smaller millenarian revolts also sprang up. A charismatic young novice named Nong claimed to be the incarnation of the protector-spirit of Cambodia, and, in 1887, incited peasants to rebel against local authorities in Kompong Svay.[37] At the same time in Kampot province, another *thommik*-claimant promised his followers that the lustral water he sprinkled on them " ... makes those who it touches invincible, and they cannot be hurt by the bullets of the French."[38] These leaders and movements lost credibility (or simply lost steam) when the larger rebellion against the crown faltered.

In 1898, in Battambang, an area controlled by the Siamese government, Khmer cardamom pickers rose up in a revolt against an oppressive tax collector, depicted in a poetic account of the rebellion as a greedy man whose " ... mind is like a prostitute's ..." and who " ... eat[s] like a pig." The leader of the revolt, a peasant named Ta Kae, described in the poem as a man whose " ... mind was strong, stubborn, without fear ... a kind man such as one can rarely find ... " was guided, or as the poem implies, misled by a Vietnamese monk named Sav, who conferred

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[32] Ibid., p. 227.

[33] Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, p. 169.

[34] Moura states that the Khmer were to blame for Poukambo's death since at night, when he was chained, the "foolish imaginations of the Khmer" took over and prompted fearful guards to cut off his head. (Ibid., p. 169). This explanation is improbable, however, as accounts of French executions and display of rebellion leaders with imputed powers of invulnerability appear elsewhere as well. When Tran van Thanh was killed in battle, for instance, his body was displayed for three days in an effort to discredit the claims of invulnerability surrounding him. Unfortunately for this French strategy, as Tai points out, " ... the French had not counted on the potency of the idea of reincarnation." Tai, *Millenarianism*, p. 48.

[35] Or "Assoa." Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, p. 151; Oknha Sottântâbreychea Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 10 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, [1921?] 1971), p. 27.

[36] Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, p. 151.

[37] Osborne, *The French Presence*, p. 189.

[38] Leclère, National Archives of Cambodia (Fonds Résident Superieure du Cambodge), Box 542, file 5181, c. 1900.

protective amulets on the rebels. Ta Kae, along with many of his followers, died in battle against the superior Thai forces.[39]

Between 1899 and 1902, ethnic Lao in northeast Siam who were also suffering under the effects of administrative restructuring and tax reforms introduced by the Siamese government began to circulate prophetic texts about an imminent catastrophe and the arrival of the Lord Thammikarāt (*thommik*, the righteous ruler). The predictions crystallized into a movement around several different leaders claiming to be *phū mī bun* (the Thai equivalent of Khmer *neak mean bon*), who attracted thousands of followers, armed with old muskets, farm tools, and protective amulets, and who attacked and ransacked provincial posts of the Siamese government until the uprising was squelched by the Siamese military.[40]

The presence of religiously potent millenarian-inspired movements and individuals continued at least into the 1930s, suggesting the extent to which this discourse was part of the religio-political imagination of the period. It tended to have its most powerful expression on peripheries: on frontiers, among peasants like the cardamom pickers, and among ethnic minority groups. Yet even if millenarianism was sometimes acted out on the margins, adopted by some and derided by others,[41] the widespread circulation and political assimilation of its ideas and images—associated with the decline of morality and the Dhamma, the imminent arrival of catastrophe, and the hope of a righteous ruler-savior—has to be regarded as a significant measure of the emotional ethos of the time.

A Millenarian Narrative about Harm, Violence, and Purification in Human History

While they varied in some details, in a general sense, the millenarian movements described above drew heavily on Buddhist cosmological ideas concerning the decline and regeneration of the Dhamma in conjunction with periods of relative poverty and prosperity. They predicted the arrival of the future Buddha Maitreya after a period of catastrophic social turbulence in which a few people would be saved because of their good actions, but many more would be lost due to their immorality. Consequently, their adherents drew on religious teachings that heavily emphasized individual purification and a karmic notion of individual identity as dependent on actions performed in the present and in previous lives. A number of these millenarian movements took on significant political connotations, although in Cochinchina, where colonial rule was more direct, the orientation of the rebellions was more specifically anti-French than it was on the Khmer side of the border.

The millenarian discourse underlying these movements was linked to a Buddhist prophetic narrative that was dominant in many parts of Buddhist Southeast Asia in different forms until the mid-nineteenth century, and which continues to underlie

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[39] Tauch Chhuong, *Battambang during the Time of the Lord Governor*, trans. Hin Sithan, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood, 2nd ed. (Phnom Penh: Cedoreck, 1994), pp. 13–22. The epic poem, composed by Ind during his government service under the Thai administration in Battambang, was translated by Hin Sithan, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood. According to Tauch (personal communication to Anne Hansen, July 2000), no full version of the poem has survived.

[40] Charles Keyes, "Millenialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36,2 (1977): 291–300.

[41] Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 10, p. 27.

some aspects of this region's Buddhist thought and practice in significant ways.[42] The narrative suggests how temporality is ordered and the extent to which it is morally charged; it also depicts violence as part of the inevitable cycle of human history in the universe. Time is divided into cosmic epochs known as *kalpa*, a vast cycle of temporality associated with the cycles of the dissemination, practice, and decline of the Dhamma, the teachings of the buddhas on "what is right,"[43] and also with the generation, degeneration, destruction, and rebirth of the universe itself. The *kalpa* itself is then subdivided into periods of decline and degeneration of the Dhamma and periods of moral regeneration and prosperity. At some points in the cycle, the knowledge of the Dhamma is lost, violence is at its worst, human life span is reduced to ten years, and even parents and children are unable to love or recognize each other; it is then that a righteous ruler may appear to restore justice and the teaching of the Dhamma, and the whole cycle begins anew. At the very end of the *kalpa*, however, the world fills up with fire, water, and ice, and the world dies off. It is then gradually reborn, exactly as it was before, with all of the same cycles of justice, violence, renewal, degeneration, and destruction, punctuated by the appearance of the buddhas, whose numbers vary according to the *kalpa*. In our current *kalpa*, the narrative suggests, we are awaiting the arrival of just one more buddha, the future Buddha Sri Ariya Maitreya.[44]

In this Buddhist understanding, the origin of extreme social violence (and its eventual cessation) is connected with the trajectory of the Dhamma in time and relative to the past and future history of human moral behavior. If the teachings of the Dhamma were followed scrupulously and human beings became perfected, it seems evident that violence would cease to exist. In the absence of this perfection, however, violence must seemingly be endured as an inevitable by-product of human history. As the *kalpa* unfolds, the understanding and practice of Dhamma temporarily stems violence, but it inevitably occurs once again as the practice of the Dhamma degenerates.

The onset of millenarian movements in Cambodia coincided with the rise and circulation of a genre of predictive texts known as *tumneay*,[45] which gave vernacular

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[42] Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ashley Thompson, "The Future of Cambodia's Past," pp. 13–18, 33–35; Didier Bertrand, "A Medium Possession Practice and Its Relationship with Cambodian Buddhism: The *Grū Pāramī*," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 160; John Marston in this volume; Judy Ledgerwood and Anne Hansen, "Prophetic Histories: The *Buddh Damnāy* and Violence in Cambodia," paper presented at Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Chicago, March 2005; Anne Hansen and Erik Davis, fieldnotes from Wat Trai Lakkh, Phnom Penh, July 2004.

[43] Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 604.

[44] Sung Siv Siddhattho [Preah Baloat Uttamolikhit], *Kappa-katha* (Phnom Penh: Bannagear, BE 2495/CE 1952), pp. 17–26.

[45] The dating of the texts is not certain, but based on evidence in the texts, Olivier de Bernon has argued for situating the translation and/or composition of the texts in Khmer in the 1860s. See Olivier de Bernon, "Le *Buddh Damnāy*: Note sur un texte apocalyptique khmer," *Bulletin École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 81 (1994): 2–3, 92; and Olivier de Bernon, "La Prédiction du Bouddha," *Aséanie* 1 (1998): 44. Current Khmer scholarship on the texts attributes them to much earlier composition, probably the Angkor period. See Thon Hen, "Ompi *Putth Tumneay*" [Concerning *Putth Tumneay*], *Kambuchasuriya* 53,4 (BE 2543/CE 1999): 39–40. The Khmer texts that circulated in the nineteenth century seem to have been translated from

and localized accounts of this translocal Buddhist narrative about time and history. The *tumneay* appeared in different versions, involving circumstances in which prophecies were spoken by the Buddha to historical figures such as Ānanda or King Pasenadi. French sources indicate the wide circulation of these texts in Cambodia throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and, at least by the late nineteenth century, they had begun to circulate in Burma and northeastern Siam as well.[46]

The contents of the varied *tumneay* texts help to account for the popular appeal of rebellion leaders such as Poukambo, who was regarded as the *thommik*, the savior-ruler predicted in some *tumneay* texts.[47] According to these prophesies, the *thommik* will arrive to save the good and pure from the social chaos caused by the corruption and moral excesses of those in power who have declined to preserve the Dhamma and thus triggered social ruin.

In a published version of the *tumneay* from 1952, future social degeneration is foretold by a dream in which King Pasenadi perceives " ... a horse with one body but two heads," and in which " ... there was someone feeding grass into the two mouths, but the horse never seemed to get full."[48] Clarifying the dream, the Buddha prophesied:

> From this time forward in the earthly realm, the ignorant and blind will become the judges who render verdicts, the defeated become winners, the winners become defeated because of corruption and bribery. At times, bribes are taken from both sides equally. All loving-kindness and compassion for the people disappears.[49]

In another of the king's dreams, not only are the actions of ordinary persons foreseen as becoming increasingly immoral, but a future king himself comes under censure and contributes to the breakdown of social order that is to come:

> It appeared to the king as if there were a golden serving bowl that cost one thousand *domlin*,[50] and it appeared that a dog came along and shat in it. The Omniscient One [the Buddha] prophesied, "From this time forward in this earthly realm, [the people] perform unrighteous actions not in accordance with

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Siamese texts, which could in turn have been based on much older Khmer texts, so these theories are not necessarily in opposition.

[46] Adhémard Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés du Cambodge* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1906), pp. 1–2; Georges Maspero, *Un Empire Colonial Français: L'Indochine*, vol. 1 (Paris and Brussels: Les Éditions G. Van Oest,1929), p. 299; Keyes, "Millenialism," p. 295.

[47] Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, p. 168.

[48] Khemorobannakar, ed., *Putth Tumneay tam Sastra Solasanimitt* [Predictions of the Buddha according to the *Sutra of the 16 Signs*] (Phnom Penh: Ronbumb Khmaer, BE 2495/CE 1952), p. 3. Excerpts included in this essay are taken from a working translation of the text by Judy Ledgerwood and Anne Hansen, with assistance from Kheang Un. I am grateful to Ledgerwood for allowing me to include portions of this translation-in-progress, which will be included in our forthcoming study of the *tumneay*.

[49] Khemorobannakar, *Putth Tumneay*, pp. 3–4.

[50] A unit of measure for gold.

> the rule of any law codes. The king also does not adhere to the ten-fold rules of kingship."[51]

This phrase, "ten-fold rules of kingship," refers to lists of virtues attached to kingship elaborated in various Southeast Asian Buddhist texts concerning justice and governance.[52] The lists stress liberality and generosity, as well as the fairness and compassion that kings must demonstrate toward their subjects, slaves, and retainers. Kings who adhere to these rules will ensure peace, happiness, and prosperity, as well as "stability and balance":

> Rice and water, plus fish and other food ... will be available in abundance. The rain from the sky, which is regulated by the *devatā*, will fall appropriately in accordance with the season, not too little and not too much. The rice in the fields and the fish in the water will never be ruined by drought or damaged by rain ... [T]he days, nights, years, and months will never be irregular.[53]

By contrast, kings who disregard the rules wreak havoc on their kingdoms and subjects by distorting the natural rhythms and functioning of the rains, winds, and seasons. Droughts and floods occur, causing widespread famine.[54] Likewise, in this same *tumneay* version, as corruption and immorality mounts:

> The celestial deity of rain does not permit rain to fall anywhere, causing drought, causing the grass to wither and the rice to die on the stalks. Because the people of the earthly realm were inclined away from the Dhamma, the deity of the wind did not permit the fruits of food to ripen.[55]

The situation worsens as hierarchical roles in society become confused. Not only does the king disregard the rules of kingship, but soldiers take precedence over scholars and armies are raised everywhere, hooligans and drunkards are appointed as judges,[56] those without family lineage are put in the places of those with family lineage, and " ... people with good lineage become desperately poor, learning to

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[51] Khemorobannakar, *Putth Tumneay*, p. 4.

[52] This could refer to the *dasa rājadhammā*, a list of virtues elaborated in Pali *jātaka* texts, which Collins translates as: "almsgiving, morality (keeping the precepts), liberality, honesty, mildness, religious practice, non-anger, nonviolence, patience, and non-offensiveness." Collins, *Nirvana*, pp. 460–61. It could also refer to an overlapping list of ten rules for kings found in the *Trai Bhūm*, which gives details concerning: taxation; the use of slaves, free men; the support of retainers and soldiers; loans and interest payments; obligations to family members; moderation in speech and habits; carefulness and lack of negligence; manner of making judgments; religious obligations; and rewards for loyalty. See Frank E. Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, trans., *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, Motilal Banarsidass, 1982), pp. 151–53. See also Leclère, *Les Livres Sacrés*, pp. 19–20.

[53] Reynolds and Reynolds, *The Three Worlds*, p. 153.

[54] Ibid., p. 153.

[55] Khemorobannakar, *Putth Tumneay*, pp. 16–17.

[56] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

remain silent."[57] Monks sell lumber and other goods, including the gifts received as alms. They sell or remove *kamphir* (sacred texts) from their temples,[58] and " ... the ignorant and stupid monks are allowed to speak over/above the elderly monks who are learned persons."[59] Family relationships disintegrate to the point that children no longer respect their parents, sons-in-law no longer respect their fathers-in-law, wives no longer respect their husbands, and all recognition of social ties and bonds is lost. As the entire society, including kings, monks, nuns, novices, and lay people, forgets to observe the precepts, the sky turns dark and day and night cease to be apparent. At that desperate point in time, the *thommik* agrees to be born in the womb of an orphaned young woman who lives like a nun in Nagar Kok Thlak (Cambodia). Violence increases as a war breaks out in all eight directions, and when so many people have died that corpses are " ... piling up as high as the belly of an elephant," the *thommik* finally makes his appearance.[60] Those who have committed evil die, and those who were moral rise from the dead. Crowned as king by the gods, the *thommik* ushers in a new era of peace and prosperity in which his subjects are

> ... very happy, secure and beautiful in appearance and complexion. All men look equally handsome, all women equally beautiful, all children equally cute. ... They all have honest hearts and cannot lie to one another. As for the animals and birds, they have loving kindness and compassion toward each other, and all the trees in the forest bear fruits and flowers according to the seasons. All produce has a wonderful taste, with no bitterness or sourness, and people pick fruit to eat but cannot consume it all. The rains and the wind come according to the seasons, and the rice in the rice fields bears fruit by itself without worry or tending.
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> Moreover ... all kings in the world heard and knew clearly that the *neak mean bon* had been born. They all bring goods, including golden and silver flowers ... coming forward to pay their respects, with none daring to stay away. Then Preah Bat[61] Thommik Reaj preaches a sermon to all of these kings. After listening, these kings are well-pleased and praise the sermon. They offer their respectful good-byes and depart for their respective kingdoms. When the year reaches 2500, this new era will bring great prosperity to Nagar Gok Dhlak.[62]

Buddhist narratives of the coming of Maitreya, as well as the many stories and legends surrounding righteous rulers, or *cakkavattin*, had been present in Cambodia for numerous centuries, but the reassertion of these stories in the form of *tumneay* texts in the nineteenth century seems to me to have occurred as a way of making sense of the contemporary experiences of harm and violence. At the same time, as Olivier de Bernon has argued, they offered a discourse for social resistance and criticism in a context where protest was not permitted by asserting that it was the responsibility of kings and leaders to create the circumstances in which their subjects

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[57] Ibid., pp. 8–9.

[58] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

[59] Ibid., pp. 8–9.

[60] Ibid., pp. 11–14.

[61] Honorific title.

[62] Khemorobannakar, *Putth Tumneay*, pp. 16–18.

could lead moral lives.[63] If the history of the cosmos—past, present, and future—was shaped by human action, when human behavior was in line with the Dhamma, the cosmos entered into a period of prosperity, and decline and violence gave way to harmony and peace. Thus, just as every individual, no matter how corrupt, contained the potential for self-purification and perfection, even a violent and harm-filled society could be seen to contain an embryonic Buddha waiting to preach the Dhamma. His generation of the Dhamma would recall the preexisting blueprint for order and harmony that must inevitably come to fruition. Besides the political effects of this millenarian narrative, then, its religious dimension gave individuals another way to address the harm and problems in society: one could try to purify one's own self, just as Ta Meas sought to do through ordination in the Sangha, or as Lady Prak did through the merit-filled act of religious building in the Wat Sralauv chronicle.[64] Acts such as these might help to lessen or alleviate individual grief and loss, but they also hastened the collective turn in history from decline and degeneration to prosperity and moral benefit for others as well as oneself.

As a means both of interpreting and mitigating violence and injustice, the millenarian narrative has had an enduring history in Cambodia. A century after its colonial circulation, during the civil war, revolution, and ensuing social chaos in Cambodia from 1970 to 1979, versions of *tumneay* texts recirculated in Cambodia and among diasporic Khmer as an explanation for the atrocities of the "*sâmay Pol Pot*," the Pol Pot period. Yang Sam, Frank Smith, and Judy Ledgerwood have documented some of these latter uses of the texts.[65] Yang Sam heard versions of the predictions from a former monk in New York:

> The thunder in the East sounds heavy
> The old guardian spirit of the country crosses his arms and cries
> ... the crow carries *lovea* fruits and spreads it everywhere,
> Those who pick it up,
> Only later do they realize. ...
>
> The thunder in the North, the fire burns the water,
> Burns the Bodhi tree, the jungle,
> When the sun goes down
> The tiger goes to extinguish the blaze of the forest.
>
> This is the war in the new era,
> Renowned people lose power.[66]

Here, the narrative of the inevitable decline and renewal of moral society shows its resilience as a means of interpreting violence in yet a different historical moment. In some of the multiple readings of the prophesies that emerged during and after the

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[63] De Bernon, "Le *Buddh Damnāy*," p. 93.

[64] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 70.

[65] Yang Sam, *Khmer Buddhism and Politics, 1954–1984* (Newington, CT: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), pp. 50–53; Frank Smith, "Interpretive Accounts of the Khmer Rouge Years: Personal Experience in Cambodian Peasant World View," Wisconsin Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 18, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1989, pp. 18–23, 45; Ledgerwood and Hansen, "Prophetic Histories."

[66] Yang Sam, *Khmer Buddhism and Politics*, p. 52.

Khmer Rouge revolution, the thunder in the east and north was understood, in various versions, to be World War II and the American-Vietnam War. The crows were understood, by many ordinary Cambodians, as the Khmer Rouge, dressed in black, who sowed seeds of hatred—disguised with the appealing rhetoric of socialism and egalitarianism, like *lovea* fruit, which is beautiful on the outside but full of worms inside.[67]

Other, more recent ethnographic research conducted by Judy Ledgerwood and Kheang Un examines how global discourses of the universal Declaration of Human Rights take on localized meanings when they are translated into the Khmer context, meanings inscribed by this same narrative of moral degeneration and individual purification. For example, a Phnom Penh-based Khmer nongovernmental organization, Cambodian Institute for Human Rights (CIHR), predicated their human rights education curricula on the idea of reversing social violence and injustice through the cultivation of moral cleansing in much the same vein as the *tumneay*.[68] As Ledgerwood and Un observe, the CIHR training manual explains rights in a form and meter used for traditional Buddhist poetry:

> Respecting Human Rights/Means ceasing all kinds of threatening/And Fighting
> That is called making merit/From your generous heart/Maintain the Dharma
> In Mind (Consciousness).
> Illegal business/Quit it immediately/Build up goodness
> Improve Merit/Cleanse yourself/And develop the country/Towards
> Prosperity.[69]

These findings suggest that this Buddhist narrative of violence, harm, and injustice remains central for Khmer, providing some individuals with a more satisfactory accounting of recent events in Cambodia than those offered by postcolonial or post-Cold War narratives about the political and global antecedents of war and/or by new discourses about universal legal rights being introduced into Cambodia.[70] Likewise, John Marston's essay in this volume on a millenarian religious-building project further demonstrates the continuing resilience of the *thommik* motif in the contemporary period.[71]

HARM AND VIOLENCE IN IND'S *KOTELOK*[72]

A second analysis of the genesis of harm and violence is evident in the ethical writings of Oknha Sottântâbreychea Ind, a Khmer Buddhist scholar and poet born in 1859, who came of age during the turbulent early years of Norodom's reign.[73] He

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[67] Ibid., pp. 52–53, and from oral interpretations I heard from refugees in Boston, 1984–1990.

[68] Judy Ledgerwood and Kheang Un, "Global Concepts and Local Meaning: Human Rights and Buddhism in Cambodia," *Journal of Human Rights* 2,4 (2003): 540–46.

[69] Ibid., p. 542. This translation is by Ledgerwood and Un.

[70] Ibid., p. 546.

[71] John Marston, "Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos," in this volume.

[72] Also transliterated as *Gatilok*.

[73] Also transliterated as: Ukñā Suttantaprījā Ind.

spent much of the 1880s in Bangkok, returning to Battambang in 1888, in time to witness and chronicle some of the millenarian violence of the late nineteenth century. Between 1914 and 1924, he lived and worked in Phnom Penh, in the heart of the growing maelstrom of discontent roused by the effects of colonial policies during the Sisowath reign, including the peasant protests of 1916.[74]

Ind's stories examining the genesis of harm and violence, included in his compendium of Buddhist ethical narratives entitled the *Kotelok*, or "Ways of the World" (probably composed between 1914 and 1921), are quite different in nature from the gargantuan vision of world history offered in the *tumneay* texts. Nonetheless, these stories seem to me to share the assumption of the *tumneay* that all human communities, their histories and futures, and the world itself are shaped by the moral actions of human beings.[75] To paraphrase Ind's definition of *loka* (world): everything that is causally connected and produced is part of the world, while everything that is beyond causation is Truth, or Dhamma.[76] In other words, every thought, word, and action produced by human beings has a cause and a result, as well as a reverberating effect on others—like pebbles thrown into the water whose widening ripples intersect. Harm, suffering, and violence are produced by actions that are careless or malicious toward others; good, prosperity, and benefit are produced by actions that are thoughtful and concentrated, and whose actors are cognizant of the impact of their behavior on others. Individuals who create benefit (*kusala*) for themselves and others will eventually experience the positive fruition of these actions; individuals who produce harm and suffering (*akusala*) for themselves and others will likewise reap the future fruits of that harm and suffering.[77] A Khmer proverb succinctly summarizes this understanding of the nature of the world:

> Doing good deeds results in receiving good in return; doing bad deeds results in receiving what is bad.[78]

In Theravadin terms, this causal conception of reality is known as *paṭicca-samuppāda*, or "dependent origination," the insight into the nature of the world achieved by the Buddha at the time of his enlightenment. In the Buddhist tradition, this recognition has often been conceived of as a cycle of causation with *avijjā*, ignorance, as an arbitrary starting point that leads, through mental and physical properties of perception and sensation, to the birth of *taṇhā*, craving or thirst, which creates *upādāna*, attachment or clinging. Attachment gives rise to *bhāva*, a sense of being, the sensation that the self, memory, fantasy, or emotion to which one has become attached is real. This in turn leads to the regeneration or rebirth of this sensation of being, as well as its eventual decay and death, and the *dukkha* or

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[74] Chandler, *History of Cambodia*, pp. 153–56; Tully, *France on the Mekong*, pp. 177–90.

[75] Anne Hansen, "Story and World: The Ethics of Moral Vision in the *Gatilok* of Ukñā Suttantaprījā Ind," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 3 (2002): 50; and Anne Hansen, "Khmer Identity and Theravada Buddhism," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 56.

[76] Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 1, p. 2.

[77] Ibid., pp. 20–22.

[78] Judy Ledgerwood, "Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province 1960 and 2003: An Essay in Honor of May M. Ebihara," (n.d.), p. 7.

suffering caused by these states. Those who fail to perceive this chain of causation at all, or who, through carelessness, lack of attention, delusion, and so on, lose sight of the real nature of the world, are certain to suffer and cause harm and injury to themselves and others.[79]

To end suffering, harm, and violence, then, according to this Buddhist perspective, one must develop insight into the nature of causation and the consequences of one's actions. Ind illustrated this point in his *Kotelok* with a Khmer story called "The Basket Weaver."[80] In this story, a basket weaver climbs a tall sugar-palm to cut down leaves for weaving baskets. He finds excellent leaves well-suited for his purposes, and as he cuts them down from the top of the tree, he begins to think about the profits he is certain to reap from the baskets he will weave. He thinks that he will have enough profit to buy a hen—and from selling the eggs produced by the hen, he will earn enough to buy pigs, and with the piglets, a cow—and so on, until he has enough profit to buy a rice farm and then plant fruit trees—at which point, he will have earned enough profit to support a wife. The wife will have a son, and he will be wealthy enough to hire a servant girl to take care of the son, and when the servant girl rebukes his son too harshly, he—the basket weaver—will kick her.

Caught up in his fantasy at the top of the sugar-palm tree, he reached out with his foot to kick the servant girl, and lost his balance. As he began to fall down, in that instant, he reached up and was able to catch onto the end of one of the leaves and hold on for dear life.

Hanging from the tree and fearful that he would fall to his death at any moment, he suddenly spotted a mahout coming toward him through the forest. He called out to the man for help. The mahout stopped the elephant right under him but still could not quite reach him. Standing on the elephant's back to reach up for the basket weaver, the mahout was careless with the movements of his feet on the elephant's back and inadvertently gave him the signal to go—so the elephant took off and the mahout had only enough time to reach up and grab onto the basket weaver's foot.

The two men hung, the one clinging to the other's foot, from the leaf of the sugar-palm, shouting accusations at each other and fearful of death. The basket weaver yelled to the mahout to let go of his foot or they would both fall, but the mahout refused, imploring the basket weaver to tighten his grasp on the palm leaf. Suddenly, they spotted four bald men coming toward them with a fishing net. They called out for help and the four bald men eventually took up their net at each of the four corners, each tying it around his neck. The basket weaver and mahout jumped down—and survived—but the weight of their fall caused the net to tighten, and the four bald men at the corners were thrown together with such force that their heads collided and they all died.

This grimly humorous story portrays the ways in which the results of one person's actions reverberate to shape the world. The conditions of human society are formed by causes leading to actions leading to results leading to further actions and so on. As with the mahout holding on to the foot of the basket weaver grasping a thin sugar-palm leaf with one hand, suspended above the net secured by the four hapless bald men, this is a world in which one person's careless, ignorant, or malevolent actions produce the conditions in which others must survive.

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[79] Hansen, "Story and World," pp. 47–51.

[80] Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 7, pp. 38–44.

In Ind's analysis, the origins of suffering, harm, and evil lie (in the terms of the cycle of dependent origination known in Pali as *paṭicca-samuppāda*) in the critical stages of *avijjā*, ignorance, and *taṇhā*, which Ind translates from Pali into Khmer as *khlean*, or "hunger."[81] Ignorance is tied to the inability to perceive the world correctly. Those who are ignorant lack discernment into the causal nature of the world and are unable to respond appropriately to the people and situations they encounter. Hunger, intertwined with ignorance through the cyclical process of origination that shapes the world, is the other major source for suffering, harm, and evil. "[W]ickedness leads to cruelty and wisdom leads to kindness," the students in the *Kotelok*'s framing narrative tell their teacher. "But ... you have not explained hungers at length yet: hunger for food, hunger for wealth, hunger for love. ... Please be kind enough to explain further."[82] In response to this request, their teacher tells a series of stories involving cases in which harm is generated inadvertently by the actions of the characters: their ignorance gives birth to their many hungers—for food, love, wealth, praise, and so on. All of these hungers are capable of generating suffering, harm, and evil. Like the addictions of the opium addicts who figure as characters in the stories, the hungers are never appeased, but tend to grow and grow, implicating and harming others.

A cycle of stories on the hunger for love illustrates ways in which harm and evil are generated from the hunger of desire, which in turn gives rise to more ignorant behavior, which further perpetuates hunger and desire.[83] The hunger for love, or sexual passion, is also referred to in the text with the Pali phrase *kilesakāma*, the "stain" or "obstacle" of sensuality, which is depicted " ... spreading like fire in such a strong manner that [men and women] surrender to it, even if they are [already] old,"[84] or like a fire consuming a corpse on a funeral pyre.[85]

The potential for hunger to generate evil is examined in a *Kotelok* story excerpted from the *Trai Phet*[86] in which the Buddha, in a previous life, is born as a brahmin-teacher. His mother, an elderly brahmani, becomes enflamed with *kilesakāma* for her son's student. Realizing that she can never have the student as her lover while her son is his teacher, she conceives of the unthinkable: she plots to kill her own son. Overcome by lust, she takes the student aside to confide:

> I am going to kill my child tonight. I will wait up and watch, and when my child goes to sleep in his bed, I will take a sword, and furtively enter [his room], killing him with one swift blow, instantly. You must not reveal any of this to any outside person, and no one will know except two of us, who will be together as husband and wife from now on.[87]

Horrified, the student reveals the plot to his teacher, the Bodhisatta, the future Buddha. The Bodhisatta places the trunk of a banana tree in his bed, covering it with

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[81] *Kotelok*, vol. 3, pp. 26, 56.

[82] Ibid., p. 26.

[83] I discuss some of these stories in more depth in Hansen, "Story and World," pp. 54–58.

[84] Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 4, p. 6.

[85] Ibid., p. 7.

[86] Ibid., p. 11.

[87] Ibid., p. 15.

a cloth to look like a sleeping person. He and his student hide in the room to await the old mother. Following the plan she had confided, she steals into her son's room and, using all her strength, attempts to kill the sleeping figure with one swift blow. Instead, the impact of the sword hitting the banana trunk causes her to fall down dead. Meanwhile, the Bodhisatta and his student, watching the old woman, feel " ... shock and repulsion stemming from the apprehension of evil arising in them."[88] The story ends with the teacher and student making arrangements for the brahmani's corpse to be cremated, recalling the image of *kilesakāma* as a fire consuming the body.

In the larger frame story of the teacher telling stories to his students in which this story is embedded, the teacher comments:

> This story has a fuller treatment in the [commentaries]. ... This excerpt was pulled out ... for inclusion in the *Kotelok* in order to demonstrate a case of the kind of ignorance characteristic of men and women in the world ..., which enables us to achieve an understanding of how ignorant actions follow from the powerful heat of the fire of passion [*kāma*] until a calamity results, such as the one in evidence here.[89]

PROBLEMS OF MEANING AND NARRATIVE FORM

The teacher's comment in this last story demonstrates the explicit use of narrative as a medium for analyzing problems of meaning—in this case, for understanding how desire and ignorance lead to harm and evil. But there are also less obvious elements *implicit* in the narrative form of the story that convey its analytical processes—literary elements that demonstrate causality, moral discernment, and the development of empathy—that are integrally connected to its analysis of the origins of harm and evil and the ways in which the text works to transform its reader/listener.

The causality that characterizes human action and defines the world comes to a climax in this story in the emotion of "shock and repulsion stemming from the apprehension of evil" that the Bodhisatta and his student feel as they watch the brahmani. Even though they know what is supposed to happen by means of the plan the brahmani confided to the student, they are still filled with horror as they watch the plot unfold. The Khmer word *sangvek*, employed by Ind to describe this emotion, shares the meaning of the Pali *saṃvega*, a word with significant Buddhist connotations. In religious terms, *saṃvega* refers to the kind of emotional anxiety one feels as a result of the " ... contemplation of the miseries of this world,"[90] a deep distress based on the recognition of suffering and its causes. Like the Bodhisatta and student watching the old brahmani, a person who has " ... contemplated the miseries of this world" knows they are inevitable. The *dukkha* of suffering, illness, old age, and death occur to each of us, but nonetheless they still generate an emotion of "shock and repulsion" when they come to us.

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[88] K = "*Dhammasangvek*." Ibid., p. 17.

[89] Ibid., p. 18.

[90] T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, eds., *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Pali Text Society, [1921–25] 1986), p. 658.

The causal nature of suffering, and the very idea that we know it will occur but we are still distressed about it, are conveyed not just in the content of the story but also in its literary form.[91] What appears to be the inevitable conclusion of this story begins when the old brahmani sees the beautiful body of the student and a "fire of sexual passion" arises inside her. The symbolic imagery of a fire consuming her body leads us to suppose, even as this description occurs, that the brahmani will ultimately be consumed or destroyed by her lust, since actions rooted in hunger or desire lead to suffering, death, and the rebirth of further ignorance. This notion of causality is embedded in the very form of the story. The logic of narrative, parallel to the conception of the world itself in this religious vision, is also causal.[92] One plot incident leads to another; the meaning of the narrative is derived from the causal connections emplotted in it. A narrative would not "work" if it was not structured in this manner. Thus, the narrative form of the text conveys the religious idea of causality that the text is trying to impart. One is forced to *think* causally through the medium of the narrative form, and see—or hear—the causally enacted outcome of actions in the story's content. The impact of narrative, then, is that one begins to understand the true nature of the world in which human actions stemming from ignorance and hunger tend, both inevitably and yet somehow still shockingly, to result in suffering and harm.

The narrative exhibits a temporal/spatial dimension that offers readers and listeners the opportunity to perceive the unfolding of actions, causes, and results. This dimension of narrative makes it particularly useful as a medium for ethical reflection on problems of meaning. On the one hand, there is an "outside" and retrospective quality to narrative. The narrative perspective in the *Kotelok* stories is one that permits the reader or listener to exist outside of and beyond the story, seeing all of the relevant actions and events revealed, even those that are hidden from characters in the story. By virtue of having an ending, the narratives take place in the past, so the results of the actions are known. As Chandler has noted in his "Songs" essay, retrospection or "backward looking" in many Khmer sources is a morally charged act.[93] In the *Kotelok* stories, as in Khmer stories in general, and as in the *tumneay* narrative, there is an implication that the past—especially when connected with the former lives of the Buddha, such as the one that forms the temporal setting of the brahmani story—holds a moral authority over the present, which makes it appropriate as a model to follow. This retrospective perspective afforded by narrative also reproduces the insight of those people who are wise enough to possess moral discernment into the causal nature of reality. Thus the narrative form also teaches and embodies the kind of discernment that its listeners and readers should want to learn.

If narrative enables listeners or readers to be situated outside the time and space of narrative action, it also, simultaneously, has the capacity to pull them inside the story, thereby encouraging them to empathize with its character. This allows them to gain insight into how characters are experiencing each moment and event, to feel "shock and repulsion" alongside the Bodhisatta and his student, for instance, as the

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[91] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 3–4.

[92] Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, trans., Richard Howard (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 41–42.

[93] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," pp. 54–55.

poor old brahmani attempts to murder her own son. But they must also feel pity for an old woman driven to such an act, and for her son, who demonstrates his filial piety by carrying out the cremation as though this had been a normal death, "according to the conventions of the caste of brahmins."[94] Just as the outside perspective allows one to become a wise person, it would seem that this interior narrative perspective brings about the "subtle and not so subtle shifts in point of view," as Lynne Tirrell has argued, that help develop moral agency by fostering a capacity for empathy in the listener or reader.[95] From a Buddhist perspective, this empathy may in turn engender the *mettā-karuṇā*, loving-kindness and compassion, which is often conveyed in Buddhist imagery—in conspicuous tension with this story—as being like a mother's "boundless love" for "her only child."[96] The juxtaposition of this story with the normative image of a mother's love in Buddhist texts suggests that the story intentionally employs this reversal in order to highlight the strength of human hunger to subvert what is natural and normal and produce evil instead. But narrative has the ability to simultaneously express and incorporate in one trope both an idea and its opposite. Thus repulsion and empathy, killing and compassion can be simultaneously embodied even in the image of a mother trying to take the life of her own son.

While the narrative form of this text embodies and "works" its listener or reader toward perceiving causality and gaining moral discernment, empathy, and compassion, it is also able to convey the complexity of the human origins of harm and suffering. Watching the brahmani try to kill her son, the Bodhisatta and his student have an "apprehension of evil." The force of narrative imagination is such that, in spite of cultural and temporal boundaries, when we contemplate her action—and that of her present-day incarnations—it makes our skin crawl with "shock and repulsion." But at the same time, the story leaves room to reflect on whether or not the brahmani herself is really evil. She is an eighty-year-old woman whose sexual passion makes her vulnerable and whose fragility becomes apparent when she falls down and dies from the exertion of wielding her sword. Obsessive passion like hers is also a common human experience, and even if this "result" is extreme, her hunger and desire are recognizable.

This story of the old brahmani and the Bodhisatta presents the perspective that harm and evil are the products of a continuous cycle of human action, rooted in ignorance and hunger, which tends to spiral out of control, generating calamitous results. Unlike the millenarian vision of change in which a hopeful prosperity inevitably follows from the period of chaos, the problem implicit in this latter vision for human beings is that the cycle cannot be stopped until all beings are enlightened through a process of perfection and purification, an end which, on the ground, appears bleakly distant.[97] This narrative, too, seems to undergird some aspects of contemporary translations of global human rights discourse. As Ledgerwood and Un

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[94] Ind, *Kotelok*, vol. 4, pp. 15, 17.

[95] Lynne Tirrell, "Storytelling and Moral Agency," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48,2 (1990): 118–19.

[96] Hammalawa Saddhatissa, ed., trans., *The Sutta-Nipāta* (London: Curzon Press, 1986), p. 16.

[97] This contrast may perhaps reveal why millenarianism lent itself more readily to mass mobilization than did the Buddhist reform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to which Ind was connected intellectually, and why the French colonial administration sought to suppress the former while patronizing the latter.

observe in their study of the Buddhist NGO in Phnom Penh, the group maintains that the current political corruption and social imbalances in Cambodia cannot be stopped without stemming the inner hungers in individuals (such as high-ranking politicians) who grow wealthy through graft and illegal acitivities. Even profound merit-making activities, such as religious building, cannot compensate for their lack of moral purification:

> Having money to build a wat/But if your heart is bad/If you don't recognize good and evil
> And rely on violence/Extreme enviousness/That is called making merit only/For popularity.[98]

In the vision of a human rights organization, and likewise in Ind's story about the poor old brahmani, calamity and destruction are countered by a historical certainty about the human potential for purification. It has been achieved by the Bodhisatta, who in his life as the brahmani's son, and in other lives, managed to perfect himself into a buddha in spite of the reverberating impact of the evil and harmful actions of others. The characters of the son and the mother in the brahmani story point to the tension in these Buddhist perspectives between the coexisting human capacities for perfection and violence, a tension that might in some cases configure contemporary Khmer Buddhist understandings of universal human rights.

Conclusion

As a historical religious archive, these Khmer Buddhist narratives have a value that goes beyond helping us reconstruct a trajectory of what happened in the past. In different ways, both of the stories that I have discussed express and, in this sense, document the out-of-control experience of violence. But even more significantly, we can examine them to see *how* they are working to construct analyses of what happened. Both of these stories suggest theories about how harm and violence arise and cease, and how this experience of violence can be imbued with meaning and order: violence will give way to something better, because that is how human history is ordered; or, violence can be caused to cease through discernment and insight because that is how humans give order to history. These narrative analyses help us understand a Cambodian Buddhist response to the kind of questions that cannot really be answered at all, let alone historically, about the human propensity to produce violence and harm, a persistent question that plagues us inside and outside of Khmer studies.

This insight into the process of interpreting experience is, in part, what renders such narratives as nuanced and rich historical sources. The uses that historians find for narratives are not necessarily intended by their authors. As an archive, Buddhist narratives have other intended aims, which are reflected in their efficacious qualities.[99] These stories not only show us how Buddhists have analyzed abstruse causes, they also invoke or recall order through chaos, offer prescriptions for individual and collective morality, purify behavior, and reorient human history

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[98] Ledgerwood and Un, "Global Concepts and Local Meaning," p. 542.

[99] Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravada Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24,2 (1996): 305–28.

toward the Dhamma. Embedded in current human rights translations, they serve as an archive that exhorts moral persons to "build up goodness" and "develop the country," while simultaneously warding off the dangers of what cannot be understood. They help us script a more satisfactory response to the tragic, violent events in latter-day Cambodia or present-day Iraq and elsewhere (see Hinton in this volume).

If, however, narratives such as these shape a historical archive that can be used to analyze and respond to violent events a century or more apart, is this archive really "historical?" The Buddhist stories I have discussed, and which I first began learning from survivors of violence in Cambodia, offer an archive that does not explain history so much as it tries to reorient it, and, in making the attempt, to offer an account of events after all, one that is both historically particular and historically translatable. As Thompson's essay in this volume also suggests, this approach yields a different method for bringing order to history-writing by enabling us to suspend our usual ways of organizing the past into events and movements and progressions, and to enter into its stories instead. This kind of historical document might not be verifiable except in the feeling of redirection it offers, an illumination briefly suspended between our usual sources, like the sudden orange and purple descent of sunset reflected in ricefields next to a forest. "In a sense," Chandler suggests in his "Songs" essay, texts such as these " ... 'answer' questions that no one dared to ask, but in the end, what do they *explain*? No more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on ... "[100]

[100] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 72.

SONGS AT THE EDGE OF DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA

Alexander Laban Hinton*

At a first glance, it might seem difficult to see the threads connecting David Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" to his more recent works on Democratic Kampuchea (DK), such as *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison.*[1] How, for example, does one move from an ancient story ("How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name") about a mother who abandons her three daughters in the forest to the depths of twentieth-century torture at a place like Tuol Sleng? Chandler provides us with a model and a clue, as he frames the stories in the "Songs" essay in terms of moral order, arguing that they manifest a tension between a vision of what *should* be and the reality of what *is*. During the tumultuous period in Cambodian history that preceded French colonialism, Chandler argues, such stories wove a meaningful narrative between an idealized conception of a properly ordered society and a world frequently characterized by violence, chaos, and fragmentation (see also Hansen, this volume).

In this essay, I argue that this tension between order and disorder—which encompasses the fluctuation between states of meaning and meaninglessness, purity and contamination, and clarity and blindness—has direct relevance to understanding Democratic Kampuchea and the dynamics of violence in places like Tuol Sleng. In the multidimensional spirit of Chandler's work, I move toward the DK sociomoral order and Tuol Sleng through another Cambodian legend concerned with moral order, *Tum Teav*, which concludes with King Reamea's obliteration of Governor Archoun's (*Âr*choun) family line seven generations removed.

* David Chandler has been an inspiration, and I'd like to thank him, first and foremost, for his groundbreaking work and the mentoring he has provided to so many junior Cambodia Studies scholars, including me. I'd also like to recognize Judy Ledgerwood and Anne Hansen for their tireless work in editing this volume, and Deborah Homsher for her copyediting of my chapter. Thanks also to Nicole Cooley who, as always, provided helpful comments and suggestions.

[1] David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perception of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Facing the Cambodian Past, Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 76–99; David P. Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

Before turning to *Tum Teav*, I want to note that Chandler's work in general, and the "Songs" essay in particular, suggests that "order"—that hoped-for movement toward the more rarely attained condition of "proper arrangement,"[2] with all of its idealized entailments (purity, prosperity, cohesion, clarity, and so forth) and feared antitheses (impurity, poverty, fragmentation, chaos, degeneration, darkness)—is a root metaphor in Cambodian society. This theme emerges clearly in the essays in this volume, all of which touch upon order in different ways. Some focus on the ritual mechanisms for reordering, as illustrated by John Marston's focus on temple building, Ashley Thompson's analysis of possession, and Judy Ledgerwood's discussion of the political rites invoked by the leaders of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Others, including my own, stress literary narratives that enact public models of ordering. Thus, Anne Hansen's chapter explores how two Buddhist narratives, the *Kotelok* and *Buddh Tumneay*, emplot the consequences of lives and times that are more or less ordered in accordance with Buddhist Dhamma.

Besides its foregrounding of the centrality of order in Cambodia, Chandler's "Songs" essay stands out in at least two other key ways. First, even as he takes up the issue of order, Chandler does so in a non-reified manner that recognizes ambiguity—or the "gaps in the world," as the title of Hansen's essay puts it. The world of "Songs" is one of liminal spaces, uncertainties, questions of meaning, and transitions, "gaps" that are taken up in various ways by the authors in this volume, perhaps most clearly by Edwards when she revisits the *srok/prei* distinction in the "Songs" essay's examination of "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got its Name." It is precisely through these ambiguities and "gaps" that Chandler is able to raise the larger existential questions that give his analysis such power.

Second, the power of "Songs" is also related to the way in which Chandler moves from a very local or textually oriented perspective to much larger sociopolitical processes. Despite their wide range, the essays in this volume all follow Chandler in making such linkages, as they discuss such issues as millennialism (Hansen, Ledgerwood, and Marston), the colonial encounter (Au and Edwards), political transitions (Ledgerwood and Davis), Democratic Kampuchea (Edwards, Hinton, and Thompson), and the intersection of the local and global (Hansen). As this brief discussion suggests, and the essays in this volume attest, Chandler's work serves as both a foundation and a model for the current and future generations of scholars working in Cambodia studies. For this we owe him great thanks. Following Chandler's theoretical work on narrative, I now turn to the connections between *Tum Teav* and DK.

Tum Teav

> The King listened to Pech describe [Tum's murder].
> He became frightfully angry. [He] spoke ...
> "Inform the soldiers
> Without delay
> To seize the [*a-*] villain whose heart and mind [*chett*] know no bounds.
> Whoever dares to disobey me will be reduced to ashes!"
> "The [*vea*] scoundrel dared to oppose me [*anh*]!

[2] Chandler, "Songs," p. 77.

The punishment: chopping, boiling, being pounded into the earth and buried up to the neck,
Then death by raking over the head.
Don't doubt [me] for one second, despicable [*a-*] Archoun!"
— Tum Teav[3]

The story of *Tum Teav,* which bears similarity to *Romeo and Juliet,* was first put into writing by the nineteenth-century poet Sânthor Mok and is thought to have a partial basis in historical fact. Because Sânthor Mok's manuscript was in poor shape, a poet and monk named Preah Botumthera Saom reworked *Tum Teav* in 1915. Cambodian scholars still debate whether Sânthor Mok or Botumthera should be considered the author of the manuscript.[4] Beginning in 1958, *Tum Teav* was integrated into the national curriculum of Cambodian secondary schools and universities; it is also recounted orally by village elders and parents and sometimes dramatically enacted. Most Cambodians are thus familiar with this legend, which is perhaps the most famous romantic epic in the Cambodian literary tradition.

Set in the sixteenth century, *Tum Teav* begins when Tum, a handsome young monk, sets out with a fellow monk and friend, Pech, to sell bamboo tables for their pagoda. When they arrive at a village in Tbaung Khmum province, the inhabitants coax Tum, who has a lovely voice, into singing religious chants. Teav, a beautiful young girl, hears Tum sing, falls in love with him, and sends Tum a message telling him about her feelings. After Tum returns to his pagoda, he and Teav suffer enormously because they miss each other so much. Consumed by misery, Tum decides to disrobe against the will of the chief monk, who has foreseen that Tum will have bad fortune if he does this. Tum and Pech return to Tbaung Khmum.

Hearing of Teav's beauty and her family's wealth, the powerful provincial governor, Archoun (*Âr̂choun*), and his wife decide to seek Teav's hand in marriage for their son. Teav's mother is jubilant about the prospect of her daughter's marriage into such a powerful family. She tells Teav, "I [am] giving you in marriage to the Governor's [son],/[So we can] have happiness from rank [*bon*] and wealth!/[We will have] daunting power [*amnach*] and status [*sakti yos*]!"[5] Teav's mother becomes outraged when Teav, who longs for Tum, refuses to consent to the marriage. When Tum arrives in Tbaung Khmum, he goes to Teav's house and professes his love. She invites him to stay with her and they become lovers. The next day, Teav's mother returns from an overnight trip to find Tum there. Not knowing that Tum and Teav are lovers, she agrees to let Tum stay at the house. Meanwhile, Archoun's son begins to bring gifts to Teav in an attempt to win her favor.

The King of Cambodia, Reamea, hears of Tum's wonderful singing and sends for him to come sing at the palace. King Reamea is so impressed that he asks Tum to remain at the palace as a court singer. At the same time, the king sends emissaries throughout the land to find a royal concubine. In Tbaung Khmum, the emissaries see

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[3] Saom (Preah Botumthera), *Tum Teav* (Paris: Cedoreck, 1986), p. 116. The translation is largely based on George Chigas, "A Draft Translation of the Story of *Tum Teav* by Preah Botumthera Saom" (Masters thesis, Cornell University, 2000), pp. 506–08; and Sophea Mouth (personal communication).

[4] For an interesting analysis, history, and draft translation of the text of *Tum Teav,* see Chigas, "A Draft Translation."

[5] Saom, *Tum Teav,* verse 49, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 240–41.

Teav and decide she would be a perfect match for the king. Hoping to curry favor with the king, Archoun agrees to break off his son's engagement to Teav. Teav's mother is even more pleased about this turn of events. Teav and Tum continue to suffer in their longing for one another. When Teav arrives at the palace, King Reamea calls for Tum to sing for his prospective concubine. Upon seeing that the woman is Teav, Tum decides to risk death by singing about his love affair with her. The king becomes extremely angry, but Teav tells the king that Tum has spoken the truth. King Reamea's anger diminishes, and he arranges for the two of them to wed.

Upon hearing that her daughter has married the impoverished Tum, Teav's mother becomes very upset. She decides to send a message to Teav saying that she is gravely ill and asking Teav to return home to nurse her back to health. Meanwhile, she goes to see Archoun and arranges for Teav to be married to Archoun's son, complaining "I'm so angry, Governor, with despicable [*a-*] Tum/[He has] brought disgrace [to my] reputation [*ap aon ke*]./[He is] arrogant [and] has no respect for anyone."[6] When Teav discovers her mother's real intentions, she is devastated and ignores her mother's tirade about Archoun's wealth and the importance of reputation. Heartbroken, Teav sends Tum a letter explaining what has happened. Tum becomes furious and immediately returns to Tbaung Khmum with a letter from the king declaring that he authorized Tum and Teav's marriage.

Tum and Pech arrive in Tbaung Khmum on the day of the wedding. After working his way through the crowd, Tum calls out for Teav, who comes and reaffirms her love for him. Tum asks her to get him a drink, neglecting to present the king's letter to Archoun. While she is gone, Teav's mother complains angrily to Archoun about Tum's audacity and lack of respect. Enraged, Archoun and his son act on their "evil [thoughts] toward Tum./[They] had no pity [or] compassion [for] Tum./[In their] aversion [and] fury,/[They] drew [their] swords [and] banded together. [They] grabbed [Tum and] stabbed [and] hacked [at him] without discussion./ ... [beating his] entire body to a pulp./Blood flowed without end. [They] split open [his head]."[7] Archoun's men dump Tum's battered body on the side of the road near a Bodhi tree, where he dies in pain. Upon hearing of his death, Teav runs to the spot, takes out a knife, cuts her throat, and then falls on top of Tum's body so they will die together.

Following these events, Pech returns to the palace and tells the king what has transpired. King Reamea becomes incensed that Archoun has killed Tum and disregarded his authority, and he orders his army to prepare to march to Tbaung Khmum. When they arrive there, Archoun, who is extremely frightened, brings offerings to the king to assuage his anger. King Reamea ignores these supplications and commands that Archoun's family and relatives seven generations removed be buried up to their necks in the ground and then have their heads raked off by an iron plow and harrow. In addition, all the members of Archoun's political faction are to be boiled alive and the residents of the district forbidden to leave the area. After King Reamea's subordinates carry out his orders to annihilate Archoun's line and faction in this manner, King Reamea returns to his palace.

As was true in the three narratives David Chandler discusses in "Songs"—"How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name," the story of Thon and the abbot, and the historical Wat Srolauv chronicle—*Tum Teav* is centrally concerned with questions of moral

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[6] Ibid., verse 81, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," p. 368.

[7] Ibid., verse 104, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 495–61.

order, manifesting the tension between order and disorder, mindfulness and ignorance, clarity and delusion. Throughout the text, an idealized vision of a properly ordered society is juxtaposed against the real world, where characters stumble and make terrible mistakes, leading to violence and disruption. Much of the story revolves around issues of hierarchy and relative social standing. Each person occupies a place in the social order, which entails a set of expectations about how they should act and be treated by others. The text is replete with hierarchical idioms that signify a character's status. King Reamea and the abbot, for example, are described and referred to using registers of "otherworldly respect."[8] Their high status is further reflected by nonverbal behaviors, as people bow down, respectfully greet, or prostrate themselves before these mighty figures. When King Reamea approaches Tbaung Khmum, Archoun even builds an elevated road to honor him.

The story also emphasizes the tremendous merit and power of figures like Reamea, Archoun, and the abbot of Tum's temple, describing them as people who have *amnach, baromey,* or *bon.* Such individuals display signs of their merit and power, such as the abbot's ability to discern the truth and King Reamea's regalia, vast authority, and ability to crush his enemies. (Tum also has a degree of power, as illustrated by his knowledge and skill.) Because of their high social standing, such people are in a position to serve as patrons. The abbot first serves as Tum's patron while he is a monk, while King Reamea later assumes this role, providing Tum with rank and position in return for his services and loyalty. Reamea also commands a large circle of clients—they, in turn, have their own patronage networks—whom he uses to quash a disloyal client, Archoun (and Archoun's "string"). Archoun attempts to assuage his royal patron's anger through offerings and supplications. Reamea is also depicted as a potent center whose power to reorder the world is ritually displayed during moments such as his departure for Tbaung Khmum: before setting off, Reamea and his entourage march around his palace, itself a representation of the center of the cosmos, three times.

The number three is a symbolically loaded number in Buddhism, denoting the ordering power of the "Three Gems" of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dhamma (the truths preached by the Buddha), and the Sangha (the monastic order that the Buddha founded).[9] During religious ceremonies, Cambodians usually declare their faith in the "Three Gems" and burn three sticks of incense before an image of the Buddha. There are three realms in Buddhist cosmology (the Realms of Desire, Form, and Formlessness), three "baskets" of Buddhist doctrine (the basket of discourses, of discipline, and of metaphysics), and three cardinal vices (desire, passion, and ignorance) and virtues (compassion, equanimity, and wisdom) in Buddhist morality. Moreover, in attaining enlightenment, the Buddha gains the superordinate "threefold knowledge" of his past lives, the nature of rebirth, and the origins and elimination of suffering. Other icons of hierarchy and order, including mandala symbols such as the sunshade and Bodhi tree, also appear in *Tum Teav.*

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[8] John Marston, "Cambodia 1991–1994: Hierarchy, Neutrality, and Etiquettes of Discourse" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1997).

[9] The following lines about the symbolism of the number three are taken from Alexander Laban Hinton, "Under the Shade of Pol Pot's Umbrella: Mandala, Myth, and Politics in the Cambodian Genocide," in *The Vision Thing: Myth, Politics, and Psyche in the World,* ed. Thomas Singer (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 170–204, which also includes a more detailed discussion of mandala symbolism.

Nevertheless, while representative of an idealized moral order, many of these same characters are motivated by more worldly concerns that lead them to act in disruptive, disordered ways, a theme that also emerges clearly in Anne Hansen's essay in this collection. Most of the characters in *Tum Teav*, for example, are deeply concerned about face, honor, and reputation. Teav's mother exemplifies this tendency, as she is obsessed with increasing her family's status through marriage. She angrily chastises Teav for falling in love with a person of undistinguished origin, an act that will shame her and destroy the family's reputation. Tum's actions are also influenced by honor, as he returns to Tbaung Khmum to fight for Teav and does not use King Reamea as a "back" by showing the letter. In many ways, Tum personifies the trope of the heroic warrior who "struggles" (*sou*) against adversity, even to the point of challenging powerful figures regardless of the poor odds for success. Status concerns also motivate the violence of Archoun and Reamea. When Tum dares to disturb Archoun's son's wedding, for example, Archoun loses face since he is the local governor and others should fear and respect him. Kru, a highly respected high school teacher from Kompong Cham, explained to me, "This made Archoun [and his son] angry. They lost honor and face before others [*bak ketteyos ke bak muk bak moat ke*] because there were many guests at the wedding. When someone does something like this, it also destroys one's power and potency [*amnach etthipol*]." King Reamea's reputation and power are similarly threatened by Archoun's defiance. In both cases, the protagonists respond with brutality, in a display of power, completely crushing those who would dare challenge them.

At its core, *Tum Teav*, like the brahmani text from Ind's *Kotelok* that Hansen discusses in this volume, remains a deeply Buddhist tale involving a moral critique of various disordering behaviors, particularly violence and anger. In Buddhist ontology, such actions stem from ignorance and desire, which lead one to become self-absorbed, to act in a "mindless" manner, and to suffer, thereby fueling the process of dependent origination.[10] Almost all of the conflicts in *Tum Teav* proceed in this manner, as the characters are driven by the Buddhist vices of greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), pride (*mana*), and delusion (*moha*). Ignorance and attachment are at the core of the story, as Tum and Teav fall in love and are consumed by desire. This leads them to experience excruciating suffering (*dukkha*), a theme that pervades the text (see also Edwards and Hansen, this volume). Thus, after Tum returns to his temple, Teav's torment is described as follows:

> Miss Teav, worried, [was] always in seclusion.
> She had become very miserable and withdrawn.
> Increasingly uncertain, [she] awaited Tum's return.
> [She] said [to herself], "My regret pains [my] body.
> [I] can't relax. The weight [on my] body [is] like a mountain.
> The mountain [was] uprooted [and] fell, pinning me down.
> [My] breath [is] intermittent. [I'm] scared to death.
> Enough! Oh Tum, I'm dying!
> [My] body [is] pale [and] emaciated [from this] misery."[11]

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[10] Maha Gosananda, *Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992); Phra Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 72–73.

[11] Saom, *Tum Teav*, p. 25, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," pp. 139–40, with slight modifications.

Tum is similarly plunged into "darkness" and suffering by his desire. As Kru noted, Tum's ignorance is surprising because he is a monk and should have developed clarity of mind:

> Tum's heart [*chett*] is characterized by rapid change. Tum is a monk and should have moral discipline ... but when he meets Teav, Tum's thoughts quickly change and become attached to Teav. He is unable to block and control [*tuap skat*] [his desire] in the mindful manner befitting a monk. ... He can't block his heart [*tuap chett*] or keep his emotions in check [*tâmkal chett*], so he decides to disrobe.

Elsewhere the text suggests that this weakness of character may be in part related to Tum's inflated sense of himself.

Caught up in an escalating cycle of desire and delusion, Tum lies to his mother and the abbot about the reasons he is disrobing. The abbot, who manifests the quality of mindfulness, immediately discerns the truth but gives Tum permission to disrobe. Throughout the remainder of the text, Tum's impurity of mind is depicted through metaphors of misdirection, darkness, and the wild. Thus, while returning to Tbaung Khmum, Tum becomes "lost" in the jungle—tormented by fear and worry, shrouded in darkness, heated by passion, and deluded by hallucinations. By the time he arrives in Tbaung Khmum, Tum is like a "crazy" person, frightening to the first people he encounters, a group of children.

It is precisely in such states that people become particularly prone to violence and anger. Thus, Tum becomes "hot" and angry when he learns that the object of his desire, Teav, is to be wed to the king and, later, Archoun's son. Other characters are attracted to material wealth and status. Teav's mother repeatedly flies into fits of rage when her desire to increase the family's status is thwarted by Tum and Teav. When Teav tells her that she loves Tum, Teav's mother "cursed [Teav] saying, 'Scoundrel! [You are] stubborn as steel. / I [would like] to grab [your] mouth [and] tear [it] apart now.'"[12] Attached to their power and status, King Reamea and Archoun also become enraged when others challenge their face, honor, and authority. To highlight the consequences of such anger, the text describes the violence they perpetrate in graphic detail. Revenge is a strong undercurrent of the action, as various actors harbor grudges for perceived slights and affronts; the Buddhist abbot, in contrast, manifests the mindfulness that enables a person to replace anger and vengeance with compassion and forgiveness.

Like "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name" and the story of Thon and the abbot in "Songs," then, *Tum Teav* manifests the tension between order and disorder, as angry, "disordered" characters are described through metaphors of heat, confusion, and blindness, states of mind that lead them to commit the sin of violence. Tum, the hero of the story, even dies at the base of a Bodhi tree, a symbol of the clarity of vision that readers may gain as they learn about the consequences of ignorance and desire and are shown that ultimately everything, like Tum's body, is "impermanent

[12] Ibid., p. 85, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," p. 383.

like a pile of sand."[13] Elsewhere, I have discussed how *Tum Teav* embodies local understandings of anger and revenge that patterned part of the violence during DK.[14] Here, I want to turn in a different direction, linking *Tum Teav*, the DK moral order, and Tuol Sleng through Chandler's dialectic of order and disorder.

SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE DK REVOLUTIONARY ORDER

Given the pain, suffering, and horror that echoed within the halls of Tuol Sleng, it is difficult to pick a point of entry into this institution of death. Perhaps it is apposite to move outside the prison's walls and back in time before it began operation, reapproaching Tuol Sleng from the broader context that shaped its institutional form and function. If Tuol Sleng may be viewed as a symbolic ordering mechanism, the DK regime's obsession with purity and order was apparent from the moment the Khmer Rouge took power.

Within days, Khmer Rouge radio broadcasts began asserting the glories of the new regime, contrasting its purity to the decadence of the US-backed government it had overthrown, Lon Nol's Khmer Republic (1970–75). A May 15, 1975, broadcast, for example, lamented that under the influence of the Lon Nol regime and its imperialist masters (the United States), many Cambodians had "become mired in the corrupt, fascist culture of US imperialism" and lost touch with their true "national identity and spirit."[15] The decline was so precipitous, the broadcast asserted, that the revolutionary forces were shocked by the almost foreign appearance of the urbanites:

> Upon entering Phnom Penh and other cities, the brother and sister combatants of the revolutionary army—the sons and daughters of our workers and peasants—were taken aback by the overwhelmingly unspeakable sight of long-haired men and youngsters wearing bizarre clothes making themselves indistinguishable from the fair sex. By tradition, as any other people in the world, our Cambodian people wear pants with comfortably fitting hips and small legs. Some of the youths in Phnom Penh were wearing skin-tight pants with over-sized bell-bottoms. ... Our traditional mentality, mores, traditions, literature and arts, and culture and tradition were totally destroyed by US imperialism and its stooges. Social entertaining, the tempo and rhythm of music, and so forth were all based on US imperialistic patterns. Our people's traditionally clean, sound characteristics and essence were completely absent and abandoned, replaced by imperialistic pornographic, shameless, perverted, and fanatic traits.

With its "mighty and matchless" influence, the DK regime had immediately set out to "clean up" this decadent state of affairs. On a concrete level, the revolutionary army began—as a May 14, 1975, broadcast states—physically "cleaning up and

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[13] Ibid., p. 105, translated in Chigas, "A Draft Translation," p. 465. For an analysis of another set of Buddhist narratives, see Anne R. Hansen, "Ways of the World: Moral Discernment and Narrative Ethics in a Cambodian Buddhist Text" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1999).

[14] Alexander Laban Hinton, "A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide," *American Ethnologist* 25,3 (1998): 352–77; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

[15] Foreign Broadcast Information Services (hereafter FBIS), (5/15/75: H4-5).

eliminating the filth of the rotten old society left behind by the traitorous clique."[16] This speech focused in particular on the cleansing of sites associated with the corruption of the Lon Nol regime, such as "gambling dens," "drinking lairs and prostitutes' brothels," and "black markets where the traitorous clique used to steal and pilfer from our people." More broadly, the DK regime proclaimed that it was restoring the country's "cleanest, soundest, most traditional, popular, and national features," instilling an "outstanding spirit ... in the minds of our people," and generating a newfound "spirit of love for the nation, people, sound mores and traditions, honesty and justice."[17] If before "people cursed and swore at each other, even within families," such things did not take place in the new revolutionary society: "There is no burglary, no gambling, no more prostitution, no more opium or marijuana smoking."

Through such proclamations, the DK regime was asserting itself as a new potent center that, like powerful kings such as Reamea or the Buddha himself, was able to move the country from a state of disintegration to one of moral order.[18] In fact, the DK regime was often referred to as *Ângkar*, a term that literally meant "the Organization" but could metaphorically conjure up the image of an almost superhuman being.[19] Like the Buddha, *Ângkar* was depicted as "enlightened," a quality that made it "clear-sighted," "brilliant," "alert and intelligent," and "clairvoyant."[20] People often said that "*Ângkar* has the eyes of a pineapple" (*Ângkar mean phnek mnoah*), a phrase that implied that *Ângkar* was all-knowing and able to see what everyone said or did. Such clarity of sight is precisely what so many of the characters in *Tum Teav* lack, leading them to act in ignorance and to generate disorder.

Given its "enlightened" and "clear-sighted" vision, *Ângkar* was depicted as able to transform Cambodian society into a new revolutionary order, one that would be premised on three interrelated bases: the Party "line" (*meakea*), proper "organization" (*karchattang*), and revolutionary "consciousness" (*sâtriarâmma*). All of these elements are manifest in a 1977 speech Pol Pot gave to commemorate the seventeenth anniversary of the Community Party, a text that also both asserts and celebrates the Party's vision and the new moral order it had instituted to revitalize a country plagued by decadence, fragmentation, and foreign dominance. Pol Pot, for example,

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[16] FBIS (5/14/75: H7).

[17] FBIS (5/15/75: H4-5).

[18] Alexander Laban Hinton, "Purity and Contamination in the Cambodian Genocide," in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 60–90; Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?* See also Ledgerwood and Marston, this volume.

[19] John Marston, "Metaphors of the Khmer Rouge," in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 105–18; François Ponchaud, "Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution," in *Cambodia 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 151–77.

[20] Henri Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004); Laurence Picq, *Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea: Speech by Pol Pot, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Kampuchea Communist Party Delivered on September 29, 1977* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1977); Ponchaud, "Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution."

described how, at the first Party Congress in 1960,[21] the revolutionaries had established the Party's political line, which had been formulated over several years by a committee that had "studied and researched the history of our people's struggle" and "a number of revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world."[22] Using this "analysis" and the "science" of Marxism-Leninism, the revolutionaries ascertained "the real nature of Kampuchean society at that time," which consisted of class "contradictions within Kampuchean society," particularly the contradiction between peasants and landowners, and contradictions between "the Kampuchean nation and foreign imperialism, particularly US imperialism."[23]

To overcome these contradictions, Pol Pot argued, the Party had to adhere to "the principles of independence, sovereignty, and self-reliance" and to "mobilize the poor peasants and the lower-middle peasants" by overcoming their false consciousness and igniting their latent "class hatred."[24] Only the "correct" Party line would enable this to happen and lead to successful revolution. In a passage that could be about *Tum Teav* if the words "a political line" were replaced with "Buddhist mindfulness," Pol Pot stated, "Without a political line which gives judicious guidance, one becomes blind. Even with great strength and determination, one cannot win. Once one loses one's orientation, one doesn't know what to hold onto, one proceeds toward certain defeat and, in the end, ruin."[25] Since the Party had ascertained the "correct political line," however, it would be able to transform radically Cambodian society. The Party was like a social engineer who, with blueprints (the political line) in hand, knew how to rebuild Cambodia from the bottom up. Interestingly, the Khmer Rouge often described this process using structural, spatial, and construction metaphors, as new institutions and people were "built" from a "base" or "foundation" and in terms of "stands," "standpoints," "borders," and "dividing lines" that followed from the DK regime's "enlightened" blueprint for society.[26]

Thus, Pol Pot's speech explained, after the old regime had been overthrown, the Party had "laid the foundation of our collectivist socialism," "rebuilding" Democratic Kampuchea in accordance with Marxism-Leninism and the principles of "independence, sovereignty, and self-reliance."[27] Collectivization and cooperatives stood at the socioeconomic center of this reorganization, as the old capitalist relations of production were abolished and forces of production collectivized. If most Cambodian peasants had previously eked out a living farming their tiny plots of land with a small amount of privately owned resources, they now began to work with collectively owned equipment on collectively owned lands.[28] Private property,

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[21] As Chandler has noted, in selecting this date, Pol Pot was asserting the primacy of his revolutionary genealogy over that of long-time revolutionaries who were in the process of being purged at Tuol Sleng. See Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, and David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

[22] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 21.

[23] Ibid., pp. 25–26.

[24] Ibid., pp. 21–22, 28.

[25] Ibid., p. 19.

[26] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?* See also Marston, "Metaphors of the Khmer Rouge."

[27] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 59.

[28] May Mayko Ebihara, "Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1968); May Mayko Ebihara, "Revolution and Reformulation in Kampuchean

money, and markets were eliminated, as was Buddhism, which, the Khmer Rouge claimed, siphoned money from the poor and mystified class contradictions. Families that had traditionally worked and consumed the product of their efforts together were now segregated; children were told their new parent was *Ângkar* and allegiance should be given first and foremost to it. As a result of these changes, Pol Pot stated, Cambodians had "become the true masters of the lands, the rice paddies, harvests, indeed, of the fruits of their labor."[29] In contrast to life under the old regime, "each cooperative has become a small collectivist society, an entirely new society, freed from corrupt and depraved culture and traditions. It is a new healthy society, which is consolidating and developing itself constantly, where equality and harmony prevail."[30]

With such organization and a correct political line, each person would more readily be able to "build" himself or herself into a progressive revolutionary. Acknowledging that "we all carry vestiges of our old class character, deep-rooted for generations, and, after all, the transition to revolutionary proletarian character is still quite recent," Pol Pot's speech noted the importance of conducting "thorough-going educational work, which is aimed at developing collectivist and social ownership and gradually eliminating the idea of private ownership."[31] This "educational work" could include radio broadcasts, revolutionary songs and dances, hard labor, political education meetings, party documents, special study sessions, "criticism and self-criticism, and periodic self-examination of our own revolutionary lifestyle, under the supervision and with the aid of the collective; all this, under the leadership of the Party."[32] Ultimately, each person had to work relentlessly to "sharpen the consciousness" (*samruoch sâtriarâmma*), fighting regressive tendencies such as the inclination toward "privativism," which included the desire for material possessions and wealth, "personal sentiments" (familial attachments, sexual attraction, religious beliefs, factionalism), and individualism (including vanity, boastfulness, and an excessive concern for one's face or rank).[33] While engaging in such consciousness work, Pol Pot explained, "our goal is to continue to build the revolutionary strength of the people, so that each of us becomes a revolutionary of the new Kampuchea, who zealously defends and builds the country, and who contributes to the rapid raising of the people's living standards."[34]

This view of consciousness entailed a new socio-moral hierarchy, on the top of which stood those outstanding revolutionaries—comprising mostly the young (whose "consciousness is most receptive to revolution"[35]) and the poor (who had been oppressed in the former regime)—who had successfully transformed their way of thinking.[36] The DK Party Statutes, approved at a Party Congress in January 1976,

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Village Culture," in *The Cambodian Agony*, ed. David A. Ablin and Marlowe Hood (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 16–61.

[29] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 61.

[30] Ibid., p. 60.

[31] Ibid., p. 57.

[32] Ibid.

[33] See *Revolutionary Flags*, Special Issue (September–October 1976), p. 78.

[34] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 57.

[35] Ibid., p. 49.

[36] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

illustrate this point as they lay out the criteria for selecting Party members, a position that conferred extremely high status during DK. The statutes state that the ideal Party members are "workers and peasants of extremely high political consciousness, indomitable vanguard elements who set the example for others."[37] This elevated state of political consciousness was to be ascertained on the basis of: revolutionary service ("a very active and unbroken record of militancy repeatedly tested in revolutionary work"); class background ("a good social class background-composition"); moral purity ("private and political life must be ethically proper"); history of associations ("no enemy entanglements"); and a record of and potential for further self-construction (by engaging in criticism and self-criticism, by their style of life, and by having "a clear and consistent life history with the details of the person's native village or the milieu in which he lives and works").[38] Ultimately, these factors were central to the key criterion in selecting cadre for leadership positions in the Party—their political consciousness, or ability to think and act in accordance with a "firm revolutionary standpoint on the political line of the Party."[39]

While the Khmer Rouge ideological calculus definitely favored the young and the poor who constituted the bulk of the "base" upon which the revolution would be built, it was theoretically possible for people from less pure backgrounds to "build" a progressive revolutionary consciousness, though this entailed constant "struggle." Thus, despite their "feudalistic" class background, the Thiounn brothers, who came from an aristocratic family with a history of association with the palace, were able to rise through the Khmer Rouge ranks because of their long history of revolutionary service (beginning with their leadership of the Khmer student Marxist circle in Paris). Such individuals nevertheless had to engage in persistent self-construction to overcome the corrupt tendencies that allegedly arose from their background. In a life-history he wrote during DK, Thiounn Prasith, the former Khmer Rouge diplomat who also had a French wife, analyzed how his "conservative feudalistic" roots had negatively affected his consciousness:

> This movement makes [me] very conscious of understanding that I who come from the exploiting class am the object of socialist revolution. That means that I strongly need to struggle within myself in order to destroy personal property completely, and to build up collective property. The class struggle inside me is very strong, too. The giving up of personal property is happening constantly. It makes me happy constantly. But this struggle is very long lasting. I need to try harder. ... Family property still plays a role, especially emotions toward my children. But comparing [this feeling] to the beginning of the year, it is lighter and more stable than before. But no matter how hard it is, I won't walk away from the revolutionary ranks or from the Party ranks.[40]

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[37] Ong Thong Hoeung and Laura J. Summers, eds., "The Statues of the Communist Party of Kampuchea," in *The Party Statutes of the Communist World*, ed. William B. Simons and Stephen White (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), p. 243.

[38] Ibid., pp. 245–46.

[39] Ibid., pp. 250ff.

[40] "Autobiography of Thiounn Prasith, former Khmer Rouge ambassador to the United Nations, date December 25, 1976," published by the Cambodian Genocide Program (http://www.yale.edu/cgp/readings/reading.htm).

Such self-construction—even by someone with a "conservative feudalistic" class background and associated corrupt mental tendencies—could potentially enable a person like Thiounn Prasith to cultivate an ability to think "mindfully" and act in accordance with the Party line.

Such cases, however, were fairly exceptional. Most of the population was divided on the basis of where they had resided during the civil war: "old people" (*brâcheachon chas*) or "base people" (*brâcheachon moulâdthan*) who had lived in Khmer Rouge zones generally had greater rights, held higher status, and were considered to have a more progressive consciousness than the "new people" (*brâcheachon tmey*) or "1975 people" (*puok dap brampir mesa*) who had lived in Phnom Penh and other large cities controlled by Lon Nol's Khmer Republic (1970–1975). The "new people" occupied the lowest rung of the new DK social order, a devalued group that was the first to come under suspicion and whose precarious position in the DK regime was reflected by a Khmer Rouge saying that was sometimes applied to them: "To keep you is no gain; to destroy you is no loss." In fact, the Khmer Rouge considered some of the urbanites who were too closely associated with the old regime—particularly former medium-to-high ranking police, soldiers, civil servants, and government officials—to be incorrigible and set out to eradicate them soon after taking power. Nevertheless, the DK regime held out hope that many of those with regressive tendencies could, like Thiounn Prasith, transform themselves through political education, agrarian labor, and constant "struggle." Over time, Pol Pot stated, they would begin to "see with their own eyes that our country has become independent, ... our countryside is being completely transformed, and the future of our country and people is bright. Many things reinforce their confidence in the new revolutionary regime."[41]

Even as it celebrates the DK regime's "clarity of sight," ineluctable progress, and new moral order, however, Pol Pot's speech acknowledges the existence of "life-and-death contradictions" that were due to "the presence of enemy agents, who belong to the various spy networks of the imperialists ... who secretly implant themselves to carry out subversive activities against our revolution."[42] Like *Tum Teav*, the story "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name," and the Wat Srolauv chronicle in "Songs," Pol Pot's remarks suggest an on-the-ground reality of violence, blindness, and disorder that diverged from and even directly contradicted the idealized vision he elsewhere asserts.

Pol Pot's remark about "life-and-death contradictions" alludes to a series of events, real or perceived, that had cast a shadow over the revolution.[43] On the economic front, local cadre had great difficulty meeting the Party's unrealistic goals of dramatically and immediately increasing rice production. Fearful of incurring the Party's wrath, many cadre sent rice that should have been set aside for consumption to Phnom Penh, thereby depriving the local populace of sufficient rations. When rumors of the resulting starvation and suffering reached Phnom Penh in the middle of 1976, Pol Pot dispatched Ieng Thirith, the newly appointed DK Minister of Social

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[41] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 62.

[42] Ibid., p. 57.

[43] David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Chandler, *Voices of S-21*.

Affairs, to investigate. In an interview with Elizabeth Becker, Ieng Thirith described the problems she discovered:

> Conditions there were very queer. ... In Battambang I saw they [the cadre] made all the people go to the rice fields. The fields were very far away from the villages. The people had no homes and they were all very ill. ... I know the directives of the Prime Minister [Pol Pot] were that no old people, pregnant women, women nursing babies, or small children were to work in the fields. But I saw everybody in the open rice fields, in the open air and very hot sun, and many were ill with diarrhea and malaria.[44]

Instead of entertaining the possibility that these conditions might be due to the "enlightened" Party's flawed economic policies and unrealistic expectations, Ieng Thirith and other Party leaders blamed the failures on sabotage: "Agents had got into our ranks, ... and they had got into the highest ranks. They had to behave with double faces in order to make as if they were following our line."[45]

Party documents from this period echo Ieng Thirith's comments.[46] Thus, the Party could maintain that "our line is correct" by explaining that "hidden enemies seek to deprive the people of food, while following our orders to an extent. ... They look like people conforming with the law. They take our circular instructions and use them to mistreat the people and to deprive them, forcing them to work, whether they are sick or healthy."[47] Pol Pot and his allies became increasingly convinced that subversives were plotting to overthrow the regime. A December 20, 1976, "Report of Activities of the Party Center According to the General Political Tasks of 1976" warns that "there is a sickness inside the party," a group of enemy "microbes" who had "hidden and buried itself inside our flesh and blood," and who intended "to smash the leadership and to fight to destroy our revolution."[48] For the Khmer Rouge, revolutionary consciousness was fickle and difficult to discern. A long-time revolutionary could suddenly regress or turn out to have been a reactionary "hidden enemy" the entire time—just as the mother of the girls in "How the *Koun Lok* Bird Got Its Name," the person who more than anyone else would be expected to protect and care for her children, suddenly abandons and tries to kill her daughters.[49] Ultimately, the true state of a person's consciousness could only be revealed through signs, a mistake made here, a suspect association made there. The pursuit of these "microbes" revealed deep cracks in the DK moral order, fissures in which violence, fear, and uncertainty became a part of everyday life.

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[44] Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1998), p. 236.

[45] Ibid.

[46] David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua, eds., *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988).

[47] Chandler, Kiernan, and Boua, *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, pp. 206–7.

[48] Ibid., pp. 183–89.

[49] See also Edwards, this volume; Solange Thierry, *Le Cambodge des Contes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1977).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: SONGS AT THE EDGE OF TUOL SLENG

While the often chaotic, terrifying, and violent world in which Cambodians lived during DK has been described by Chandler[50] and others, I want to conclude by turning to Tuol Sleng, an institution about which Chandler has written the definitive study.[51] Tuol Sleng occupies an interesting place in relation to the DK idealized sociomoral order, as it was symbolically devoted to containing and eliminating the "hidden enemies burrowing from within," who were perceived as threatening the very existence of this order. The centrality of this institution was illustrated by a metaphor that Son Sen, the DK Secretary of Defense, sometimes used to describe Tuol Sleng: he called it the "nation's breath" (*dânghaoem cheat*).[52] This metaphor had enormous ontological resonance in a country in which health is viewed as being linked to the equilibrium of the bodily humors, particularly of the "winds" flowing in the body, and inner balance associated with proper respiration.[53] To call Tuol Sleng the "nation's breath," then, implied that it was a key mechanism for maintaining the stability and health of the body politic. Of course, as illustrated by Teav's invocation of breath to describe her suffering during Tum's absence ("Pain [and] anger twist inside [my] liver. / [My] breath [is] intermittent. ... Enough! Oh Tum, I'm dying!"), the breath can also be linked to emotional disequilibrium, an association that more aptly captures the spirals of violence and destruction at Tuol Sleng.

In many respects, Tuol Sleng was structured to produce order. Like a disease that was diagnosed and treated, the prisoners, most of them revolutionaries who had come under suspicion, were removed from the larger society, confined and disciplined (photographed, registered, shackled, and regulated), and, frequently, tortured into giving a confession.[54] Since the "all-knowing" Party did not make mistakes, the arrest of these "microbes" implied their guilt. (In fact, after the DK purges began in earnest, only a handful of prisoners survived incarceration at Tuol Sleng, and these individuals survived only because they had special skills that were useful to the prison authorities.) Interrogators were therefore expected to generate "proof" that retroactively legitimated the arrest, affirmed the "clarity of sight" of the DK regime, and explained away the problems plaguing the country. If "doing politics" didn't produce a confession, the interrogators could utilize tortures ranging

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[50] Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History;* David P. Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian Past, Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996); Chandler, *Voices from S-21;* Chandler, *Brother Number One.*

[51] Chandler, *Voices from S-21.*

[52] Chandler, *Brother Number One,* p. 166, n4.

[53] Devon Hinton, Khin Um, and Phalnarith Ba, "*Kyol Goeu* ('Wind Overload') Part I: A Cultural Syndrome of Orthostatic Panic among Khmer Refugees," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 38,4 (2001): 403–32; Devon Hinton, Khin Um, and Phalnarith Ba, "*Kyol Goeu* ('Wind Overload') Part II: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Mechanisms of *Kyol Goeu* and Near-*Kyol Goeu* Episodes of Khmer Patients Attending a Psychiatric Clinic," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 38,4 (2001): 433–60; John Lambert Marcucci, "Khmer Refugees in Dallas: Medical Decisions in the Context of Pluralism" (PhD dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1986); John Lambert Marcucci, "Sharing the Pain: Critical Values and Behaviors in Khmer Culture," in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile,* ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 129–40; Toni Shapiro(-Phim), "Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1994).

[54] Chandler, *Voices from S-21.*

from beatings and cigarette burns to water submersion, partial suffocation, and the forced consumption of feces and urine.[55]

The goal of interrogation was to produce confessions, which were written and rewritten until the narratives were just right. As Chandler notes, over time the confessions took on a characteristic four-part structure, beginning with "life-histories" that listed a prisoner's familial connections, work units, and associations: "These curricula vitae were normally followed by a section titled 'history of [my] treasonous activities' or 'my political biography,' with data arranged in chronological order. A third section, called 'plans,' described what the prisoners would have done had they not been arrested." In the last section, prisoners had to list their associations, "or 'strings of traitors,' with indications of their whereabouts. In some cases, the 'strings' included everyone, even dead people, who had been named in the confession."[56]

If the end of interrogation was preordained, the process was not, with the interrogators trying to discover what treacheries the prisoners were hiding and the prisoners trying to figure out what their interrogators suspected and wanted them to say. If interrogation and torture forced the prisoners to confess, the written confession itself then served as the key medium through which this interchange between prisoners and interrogators proceeded. Thus, an interrogation manual from S-21 instructed that the prisoners had to "write confessions in their own voice, clearly, using their own sentences, their own ideas. We should avoid telling them what to write." Once this text had been procured, the interrogators would be able to "raise their weak points, press them to explain why they did things, why they are lying, concealing, abbreviating things."[57]

As the process proceeded, the prisoners were transformed into the mimetic opposite of the progressive revolutionary they had supposedly been attempting to resemble.[58] Since consciousness had to be interpreted through signs, the "evidence" of the prisoners' true state of regressive consciousness was "revealed" in the text of each person's confession, a narrative that was constructed so that it represented the inverse of the life-histories that cadre like Thiounn Prasith wrote to assert their progressive political consciousness.

For example, in his Tuol Sleng confession, a Northern Zone cadre named Reap describes how he was ordered to "try to build the military forces in a positive manner so that they would serve the revolution."[59] While it is likely that Reap did perform such consciousness work with his troops, his confession transforms such acts into their opposite. According to the confession, instead of carrying out this order, Reap tries to convert his soldiers into CIA agents and entice them to join a plot to overthrow the government. In the narrative, Reap describes how he sought to influence his "traitorous forces" by describing the hardships they faced (perhaps using the opportunity to express some of the true unhappiness many people felt about the harshness of revolutionary life):

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[55] Ibid., pp. 82, 130.

[56] Ibid., p. 89.

[57] Ibid., p. 108.

[58] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

[59] The following material on Reap (Re Sim) is drawn from his Tuol Sleng confession, CMR 126.20. For a detailed discussion of Reap's confession, see Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

> ... collectivism is difficult, requiring much work. You receive little food and do not have the freedom to travel about freely. This is the discipline of *Ângkar*. We are liberated, but can't go visit at other people's homes. Even at the age of twenty, we don't yet have wives. This is because the collectivist way is strict.

Further, according to his confession, Reap attempted to corrupt the minds of his followers with "privativist" sentiments, attracting them "with watches, new bikes, or new clothes according to their desires, playing upon self-love, making them into a group that thought of self-interest, not the way of *Ângkar*. ... And those I dared to build joined the CIA." Following this passage, Reap's confession lists the names of over a dozen soldiers in this "string connected with me." Elsewhere in his confession, Reap describes his supposed participation in a variety of other traitorous activities, such as plotting to poison his superior and to overthrow the DK regime, secretly supporting a group of local bandits, fostering decadence, and engaging in economic sabotage.

Once the narrative had been constructed in a satisfactory manner, prisoners like Reap were returned to their cells and eventually executed. Their confessions, however, survived them, providing fodder for the paranoia and megalomania of Pol Pot and associates. Such confessions seemingly confirmed that plots and treachery lurked everywhere, even among the highest echelons of the Party. Economic sabotage, in turn, explained away production failures and food shortages in the countryside, while the activities of such "hidden enemies boring from within" provided a rationale for why the masses often failed to display the sought-after revolutionary fervor. Having properly "analyzed" the source of these "life-and-death contradictions," the Party could "solve" these "contradictions ... by the measure proper for enemies,"[60] reeducating some, eradicating many others. Tuol Sleng was perceived as crucial to this process, as it symbolically purified and reordered society through the incarceration, interrogation, confession, and execution of the dangerous "microbes" that were creating "life-and-death contradictions" in the new revolutionary society.

In other respects, however, Tuol Sleng manifested an on-the-ground reality that differed markedly from this idealized position as the ordering "nation's breath," one that more closely resembled the world of violence, blindness, and fragmentation characteristic of *Tum Teav* and the "Songs" stories of Thon and the abbot and "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name." This latter characterization more neatly fits the reality of the prisoners' lives, as they endured privations and torture while piecing together their confessions. Based on an interrogator's notebook and other documentation, we know that the prisoners were emotionally manipulated and made to feel abandoned, to think of their loved ones, and to hold onto a glimmer of hope that they might still survive. The resulting mixture of hope, despair, and confusion is evident in a memorandum written by Siet Chhe, a high-ranking Khmer Rouge official who was interrogated and tortured for more than five months, on May 8, 1977:

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[60] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 58.

> On the evening of May 7-8, 1977 [i.e., tonight], my state of mind has been unstable in a way that I cannot describe. I can't see any road to the future. I beg the Party to show pity on its child at this time.
>
> [These are] developments in my state of mind: State 1. The period after the Organization first arrested me until 4 May 77, was one of report writing on every point that the Organization wanted explained. I hoped that the Organization would inquire and investigate at the bases ... [to] verify my statements. ...
>
> State 2. From the evening of May 4 until [today], I underwent all kinds of torture according to *santebal*'s procedures. *Santebal*'s perception [so far] has been that I am a 100 percent traitor and that there is no way at all that I am not a traitor.
>
> So, given their stance, the level of torture has gradually been increased so that as I face this situation my feelings fluctuate wildly. I do not see any way to get out. [Tonight] my feelings are as follows:
>
> 1. If I admitted to being a traitor when I was not, I would not know how to report any [genuine] activities with collaborators in a reasonable, continuous way. ...
>
> 2. Weighing this back and forth, I see the best way out as death ... sudden death to escape the pain ... and be with the Party until the end. But there is no possibility of sudden death. Again, no way out. ... I fear torture and death. If I was connected with any traitors, I could immediately tell the Organization and I would be free from this torture immediately.
>
> 3. After considering this back and forth, and finding no way out, this morning I struggle to write to let the Organization know about the development of my feelings and pity me. This last request is to ask the Organization kindly to delay my torture and to reconsider the three traitors' testimony that accused me. These enemies made this up. I know there must be contradictions in some important points.[61]

This harrowing passage exemplifies the fear, confusion, and disorientation that so many prisoners must have experienced under interrogation.[62] Most immediately, Siet Chhe is searching desperately for an end to the suffering, whether through "sudden death to escape the pain" or though a miraculous intervention of "the Organization" that would "kindly delay my torture." With his "feelings fluctuating wildly," Siet Chhe simultaneously seems to "not see any way to get out" while he pleads with "the Organization" to intervene and exonerate him. To an extent,

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[61] CMR 138.11, translated by Richard Arant and David Chandler and quoted in Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, pp. 84–85.

[62] For a description of the experience of torture at local prisons in the Cambodian countryside, see Haing Ngor, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1997), pp. 215ff., 239ff., 300ff.; and Vann Nath, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), pp. 27ff.

prisoners like Siet Chhe resemble the girls in "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name" insofar as they are all inserted in a liminal context associated with violence and "the wild," a space where their identity is transformed and they come to be regarded as less than human. And, like the characters in *Tum Teav*, the prisoners suffer in a place characterized by "blindness," having lost control of their bodies, their surroundings, and their understanding of the larger events at play. The downfall of former high-ranking cadre like Siet Chhe also resonates with the historical chronicle in "Songs," which tells of Narin's family's fall in status and how Narin and his son eventually die unredeemed and in the forest.

While we must be careful not to exculpate the prison personnel (for, regardless of their orders, they were the ones who tormented prisoners like Siet Chhe) or make their plight directly comparable to that of the prisoners, we may still recognize that the cadres who worked at Tuol Sleng lived in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.[63] Revolutionary consciousness was always on display in this panoptic institution, as one's fortune could suddenly plummet with the smallest mistake or innuendo.[64] In fact, many Tuol Sleng cadres, including interrogators, were suddenly arrested and found themselves imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, making confessions of their own.[65] And, for the cadres at Tuol Sleng, there was little doubt about what one's fate would be. One cadre from Tuol Sleng, "Lor," told me: "We were always afraid. Most of all we were scared that we'd say something wrong. Or, if they arrested any big bosses and brought them there [and you were connected to their string], you might be imprisoned, too, when they gave names." Such remarks parallel those made by other Tuol Sleng cadres.[66] For such perpetrators, then, obtaining a successful confession provided a form of order against the threat of fragmentation and violence, as it likely guaranteed survival for another day.

Like the mother in "How the *Kaun Lok* Bird Got Its Name," the crocodile in the story of Thon and the abbot, or characters like Archoun or Teav's mother, the perpetrators at Tuol Sleng acted in blindness, driven by a fear and ignorance that led them to act in often brutal ways. And, like the narratives from these stories, the text of the Tuol Sleng confessions reflected a tension between an idealized moral order and a messy reality. At the same time that it asserted a newly ordered revolutionary society, in which "hidden enemies burrowing from within" had been arrested by the "all-knowing" *Ângkar*, the sequence of actions narrated within the confessions (a history of treasonous acts that the Party Center had not foreseen) and the murky and brutal process by which the confessions were obtained suggested the world of brutality and violence that lay at the core of DK, but which the DK regime refused to

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[63] Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?*

[64] Laurence Picq recalled one incident in which a projection team suggested that an assembly of top cadre celebrating the regime's third anniversary view a documentary on Democratic Kampuchea, filmed by a Yugoslavian delegation of journalists, that had just arrived: "Although the sound track was missing, we watched a succession of images that presented a reality undeniably different from the official version. The terror that infused the scenes filmed in rural zones was clearly transmitted to the assembled spectators, all of whom were aware of the consequences that would flow from this diplomatic incident." Picq, *Beyond the Horizon*, p. 117. See also Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over*, p. 315. The projection team was immediately arrested and accused of being CIA agents.

[65] Chandler, *Voices from S-21*.

[66] Ibid.; Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim, *Victims and Perpetrators: The Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Cadres at S-21* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2001).

acknowledge as part of its own character, identifying it, instead, as alien. Similarly, even as it celebrates the glorious history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, Pol Pot's speech alludes to this alternative reality of "life-and-death contradictions," of certain fragmenting "reactionary elements" that had "camouflaged themselves."[67] For, ultimately, everyday life in Democratic Kampuchea bore much more resemblance to the brutality, discord, and violence manifest in *Tum Teav* and "Songs" than it did to the idealized order the Khmer Rouge so frequently tried to assert.

At the beginning of this essay, I noted three themes that run through the texts discussed in "Songs" and in the essays in this book: order, ambiguity, and relevance to real-world events. While Chandler returns to all of these issues at the end of his text, his concluding remarks focus more specifically on questions of meaning that arise as "gaps" emerge between "what ought to happen in the world" and "what often happens."[68] He notes that "in a sense, the texts 'answer' [these] questions that no one dared to ask, but in the end, what do they *explain*? No more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on."[69]

This evocative phrase from which the "Songs" essay gets its name, Chandler tells us, is inspired by a passage from Fredrik Barth's book, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea*.[70] The passage describes how, during their evening dances, the Baktaman "sing their songs of love and violence" at a clearing edged against an "immense, untouched forest-covered landscape, dwarfing man's tiny village clearing and muting his tiny noise." It is here, according to Barth, that the Baktaman sing and dance while enacting highly symbolic and culture-specific rites that serve as "both their main beacons and their tools" for constructing meaning against the enormity of this landscape with all of its existential, social, and religious connotations.

Like the Baktaman rites, the Cambodian "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" grapple with such larger questions in a locally meaningful way—one that is further illustrated by the essays in this volume, ranging from Marston's discussion of temple building and millenarianism to Thompson's discussion of spirit possession. As Hansen's chapter notes, narratives like the "Song" texts do provide answers of a sort, often through prescriptions for better action and moral purity that stand in contrast to the decisions that characters make in the stories. This is certainly true of *Tum Teav*, as well as (and in an almost perverse manner) the Tuol Sleng confessions that enact a drama of treachery that, if reversed, would lay out the path to being a proper revolutionary. Thus, each confession tells of how the prisoner "joined the CIA" just as he or she joined the revolutionary movement, destroyed crops instead of working hard to grow them, betrayed the revolutionary organization instead of blindly obeying it, and so forth.

Chandler's essay tells us that it is precisely at such times, when the idealized version of order clearly grates against the lived experience of disorder and chaos, that people must confront that enormous Baktaman-like landscape that throws into

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[67] Pol Pot, *Long Live the Seventeenth Anniversary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea*, p. 58.

[68] Chandler, "Songs," p. 99.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 267.

relief the limits of our being—those gaps that all of us confront with the cultural beacons and tools that we have at hand, with our songs at the edge of the forest.

In the wide-ranging spirit of David Chandler's work and particularly with the imagery of "Songs" in mind, I close with "Brotherhood," a poem by Octavio Paz that sings one of these songs in a very different context:

Brotherhood[71]
Homage to Claudius Ptolemy

I am a man:
little do I last
and the night is enormous.
But I look up:
the stars write.
Unknowing I understand:
I too am written,
and at this very moment
someone spells me out.

[71] Octavio Paz, "Brotherhood," in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987,* trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York, NY: New Directions, 1987), p. 508.

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PART II

ALTERNATIVE READINGS OF THE PAST

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PERFORMATIVE REALITIES: NOBODY'S POSSESSION

Ashley Thompson

GENERATING HISTORY

While it is first and foremost a discussion of and a meditation on spirit possession and various related experiences or phenomena in Cambodia, this essay is also, and I would say inevitably, even structurally, an exploration of certain questions of history. Intellectual histories to begin with, to begin, that is, with a reflection on relations presupposed by the *Festschrift* in general, and then, by this *Festschrift* here. What relations obtain, what metaphors pertain, between "generations" of teachers and students? I am not a direct descendant of David Chandler, his student, or a historian in his line. Our relations are much more difficult to trace, and, I believe, the stronger for it. Rather than forming or training me in his image, Chandler has encouraged, accompanied, and, in a sense, made room for me. And this, in the end, is precisely the image of Chandler I would like to celebrate here. Rather than possessively marking out the territory of Khmer history in view of passing it on to a *prince héritier*, he has generously welcomed me as an immigrant into the field. Chandler's encouragement is infused with a sense of complicity: we share American roots that have been cut but are ever binding, which, through over-determined historical accidents, have branched into Cambodia and France. This complicity has never given way to proprietary claims by which his roots could not be mine as well, or to paternalistic ones by which mine could only be his. At times I have acted the child demanding the parent to follow suit. And Chandler has consistently stood by my difference, giving me a sense of generation—generating without confining—as a point of reference for my own history, and my own work.

The reflections that underlie and/or emerge from this essay on spirit possession have led to a series of research projects and career "moves" that have themselves brought me over the past few years to reconsider some fundamental questions about history—in and of Cambodia first, but also, and with particular reference to O. W. Wolters's reflections on regional definition,[1] in and of Southeast Asia as a

[1] Primarily in O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, in cooperation with ISEAS,

(problematic) whole. At the same time, this research includes an historiographical dimension in that I have become particularly interested in the production of history in relation to the definition of cultural entities in terms of geographic space. And yet I have authorized myself—in honor of Chandler, knowing that I can count on his benevolent assent—to take what must appear from the perspective of the traditionally constituted domain of "history" to be great intellectual and methodological liberties. And so this essay, conceived as a reflection on and in the telling of history, may appear at first glance to concern a series of other disciplines—ethnography, psychoanalysis, literature, and art history, for example.

The obvious point of departure for the stories I wish to tell, as well as for the academic-intellectual genealogy I hope not to betray in the process, is Paul Mus's "India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa."[2] Mus was one of Chandler's teachers, and in 1975 Chandler coedited an English translation of this article, which originally appeared in French in 1933. "India Seen From the East" calls for a reevaluation of the intellectual paradigm that dominated the study of Southeast Asia until quite recently, and under the influence of which Southeast Asia was seen from a certain West—that is, from the perspective of India, and more particularly, from the "India" constructed as a monolithic entity by European classicists. In this sense, "India Seen from the East" is quasi-prophetic: years before the outbreak of World War II, which was to change profoundly not only relations between the East and the West, but ultimately so much of the thinking on and in the "East" and the "West," Mus was among a handful of scholars who understood the political urgency of challenging colonial structures. Yet it would take the war, and the subsequent dismantling of the colonies, culminating in the socio-politico-intellectual upheavals of the 1960s, for the seed Mus had planted to take root. To gauge Mus's vision we need only recall that G. Coedès's *Indianized States of Southeast Asia* was first published in 1944. Though it remains a fundamental reference, the book's title[3] reveals the persistence of the very analytical-political structures Mus was already combating in the 1930s, and against which he continued to struggle until the end of his life.[4]

National University of Singapore, 1999), Introduction, Chapters 1–3, Appendix A, and Postscripts I–III.

[2] Paul Mus, "L'Inde vue de l'Est: Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa," *Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* (BEFEO) 32 (1933): 367–410, translated and edited by I. W. Mabbett and D. P. Chandler, published under the title "India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa," Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 3, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1975.

[3] This book has undergone a series of name changes, themselves indicative of changes in the times. It was first published in 1944 under the title *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d'Extrême Orient* as tome VIII of the *Histoire du monde*, edited by M. E. Cavaignac. "*Histoire ancienne*" was then deleted, while "*Extrême Orient*" was replaced with "*Indochine et Indonésie*" in the 1948 and 1964 editions (Paris: E. de Boccard). The English title replaced the colonial Indochina/Indonesia division with the synthetic post-war appellation "Southeast Asia": *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press, 1968). This translation of the 1964 French edition includes some additional materials.

[4] To be more precise, one might say that what is implicit in early Mus is made increasingly explicit over time: while his pre-war publications privilege cultural history, the political crises of colonialism and its aftermath can be seen to dominate Mus's post-war production. His academic career was, in fact, to take a decidedly political turn with World War II. During this period, too, Mus was to prove visionary. As advisor to the French military command in Vietnam in 1945–1946, he repeatedly submitted political warnings drawn from his theoretical

I asked David Chandler about his relationship with Mus as I was first preparing this article, and he kindly responded with two long emails.[5] He said Mus had been his "most inspiring teacher ... ever," and I imagine this inspiration played a role in his ultimate decision to leave the Foreign Service and take up an academic career. Chandler's publication record also seems to be following a certain pattern set by Mus. With deep historical and linguistic knowledge developed early on informing his later analyses of contemporary political phenomena, and with a renewed post-war engagement in the field, Chandler, like Mus, has worked at the nexus of academics and politics. Chandler, in turn, has always warmly encouraged me in my more or less academic endeavors, and many of the present thoughts evolve from courses I gave in my first years of teaching in America after several years of my own post-Vietnam-War brand of foreign—or perhaps it was indigenous—service in Cambodia. But as I mentioned above, there is no simple genealogy linking our generations. Chandler has always been something other or more than a father-figure destined to retransmit what his teacher taught him, precisely because what he learned and transmits is to envisage or allow for something beyond fixed models. It seems to me that Chandler's generating influence is indeed to be situated in his inclusion of difference. Instead of attempting to draw a line separating inside and outside, or connecting ascendants and descendants in some rigid line of thinking, and while himself referring to Mus as his teacher, Chandler lauds the difference—and a certain indifference—that Mus embodied. Mus's "touch," he writes,

> is one I envied. His indifference to "disciplines" was an admirable sign of his first-rate, free-ranging mind. He had been a student of Alain at the Lycée Henri IV in the 1920s [...] if you know Alain's essays you can get some of the "feel" that emanated from Mus. His advice to the class was (often) to "reach out to Asia and touch it with the tips of your fingers."

Mus was able to move beyond traditional academic models and boundaries in part thanks to his extraordinarily deep rooting in multiple disciplines (sociology, philology, art history, ethnography, literature) and cultures (Vietnam, Champa, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Tibet, India, France, America). It is no surprise, then, that Mus is constantly bringing out what I would call the universal implications of irreducible cultural singularity. This, in a certain sense, is what the present paper is about. And indeed, by Chandler's account, Mus's teaching was more than simply interdisciplinary because it went beyond the traditionally constituted domain of academia itself. It involved cultivating knowledge in the name of a capacity to *feel*: to "touch" and be touched. It is this sensitivity to a kind of contact, a giving and receiving beyond knowledge, that distinguishes Mus's work. And it is this distinction—this difference—that Chandler so admired and so admirably translated. I am pushing what Chandler says about Mus in a direction that particularly interests

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and personal-ethnographic understandings of the field. Indeed, this phrase from a 1946 report addressed to de Gaulle—"*Rien ne poussera plus en Indochine qui ne soit issu du sol même*" ("Nothing that is not born of its own soil will ever grow in Indochina again")—reads as if it could be excerpted, save a tense change, from his 1933 "India Seen from the East." Report excerpt from Serge Thion, "Paul Mus: Observateur privilégié," *Le Monde*, October 27, 1972, p. 19. Mus eventually returned to academic work in France and America. Toward the end of his career he taught at Yale, where Chandler was beginning graduate work.

[5] July 3, 2002.

me, but I think I am not being unfaithful to the basic logic of their intuitions. To better indicate my own hybrid genealogy and to foreshadow the paths this essay will take, let me note that, to my eyes, this "beyond," which even surpasses interdisciplinarity, is akin to Freud's positioning of psychoanalysis *beyond* the simple rationalistic, systematic thought that is typical, he says, of animism, philosophy, and narcissism.[6] And it is kin to what Hélène Cixous once called *écriture feminine*. This brings us, in rather telegraphic fashion, to questions of sexual difference—questions not addressed as such in Mus's time but which, I believe, inform Mus's and, in turn, Chandler's work in a remarkable way. In short, questioning the Indianized paradigm opened new possibilities for engendering Southeast Asian history. Paul Mus and David Chandler lead us to explore the mysterious and exhilarating domain of *feeling*.

Chandler's early essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" is exemplary in this regard. The essay's writing style, aptly characterized by several authors in the present volume as "lyrical," mirrors—one might even say performs—the essay's topical concern with capturing emotion in history. Of course, unlike the soldier in the battlefield, emotion cannot be captured in any straightforward manner. It is the uncapturable that is caught here, like a photograph of perfume—the intangible but ever so real. Though forthrightly historical, "Songs" does not strive to know the knowable—in establishing dates or reconstructing precise events, for example. It is concerned, instead, with exploring what the historian, like the Cambodian historical actor him or herself, cannot simply know: in this case, "perceptions of ambiguity" in nineteenth-century Cambodia.[7] Interpretation admits subjectivity; hypotheses do not lead to conclusions. Emotion is seen not only as a consequence of historical events, but as playing a role in the very unfolding of history.

Chandler's selection of source material for his study of nineteenth-century history is notably eclectic and daring: two folktales which by their very nature cannot be construed as rendering any sort of evenemential history of any particular period in time, and a family chronicle which, while recording specific historical events, is embedded in the literary through its context, as a product of Buddhist merit-making. Writing history with materials traditionally perceived as historically problematic, if not unequivocally ahistorical, Chandler's "Songs" follows Mus's appeal, first, to interdisciplinary work. Yet it is, I believe, the particular Mussien engagement with textuality in the broadest sense that allows Chandler to "reach out to [Cambodia] and touch it." Feeling its way through the open-ended potentiality of texts, "Songs" embraces narrative in form and content—and is no less historical for it.

Indeed, this methodological exploration of Chandler's leads us toward potential understandings of history from an "indigenous" point of view. And, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the following, it is no coincidence that any such search for the indigenous, bound up as it is with a broadening of the modes and the goals of modern historiography, leads to questions of sexual difference. It is no coincidence that, in stark contrast with the dominating viewpoint of material typically used by modern historians for establishing Cambodian history, Chandler's source material

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[6] S. Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1982]), pp. 11–12.

[7] David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), p. 53.

for "Songs" is dominated by visions of the feminine. With the double genitive formulation "of the feminine" here, I mean both visions people have of the feminine, such as those portrayed in the two folktales studied in "Songs," as well as visions women themselves have, such as those portrayed in the essay's family chronicle, sponsored as it was by a nineteenth-century widow mourning the loss of her husband and son.

My hope with the present essay is to suggest a few more paths for carrying on from where Chandler leads us with "Songs," and indeed where Mus leaves off at the end of "India Seen from the East": with the renewed promise of another kind of history, an indigenous history that would come not from the rock or the *linga* of the chief or the king, which constitute the central subjects of "India Seen from the East," but instead from "womenfolk" telling stories "beside their huts."[8] With these stories, I aim more specifically to suggest a possible trajectory for pursuing research on an enduring paradox in the historiography of Southeast Asia: while the "relatively high status of women" in Southeast Asian cultures has often been seen to distinguish the region as a geocultural entity from its looming western and northeastern neighbors, Southeast Asian history, at least as written by ancient chroniclers and scholars of the "modern international tradition," has given little space to feminine voice.[9] This is a paradox that O. W. Wolters, at the end of his life, began to address directly.[10] Predictably, however, anthropologists have constituted the avant-garde in this domain. And here it is no coincidence that Mus was a master ethnographer; in this regard, too, he was quasi-prophetic, divining, through close study of the indigenous, the necessity and possibility of giving voice to women in history. As I have suggested above, Chandler's literary voice, in turn, brings him into a sort of anthropological touch with indigenous expression, ultimately letting feminine voices sound.

The following reflections on possession in—and I would even say by—Cambodia, which can be thought of as a renewed attempt to study indigenous cults, are meant to contribute to these conversations between generations and cultures, between women and men, old hands or new, among disciplines, and even between the living and the dead, about ways in which we may begin to conceive and write other kinds of histories. We must, of course, write other voices into history, but in order to do so, must we not also reconsider the very premises of historical enquiry? Rather than simply filling in the gaps left in history, must we not examine the mechanisms, the very traditions, that have made the history we know? Must we not

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[8] Mus, "India Seen from the East," p. 51. The present article can be seen as a sequel to my "Paul Mus vu de l'Ouest: Á propos des cultes indiens et indigènes en Asie du Sud-est," in *L'Espace d'un regard: Paul Mus et l'Asie (1902–1969)*, ed. D. Chandler and C. Goscha (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2006), pp. 97–112. This piece examines Mus's reading of the indigenous stone/exogenous *linga* cult as his own lead-up to explorations of sexual difference in history.

[9] One of the more recent and synthetic commentaries on this gender paradigm can be found in A. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), pp. 146–72. Though in recent years some attention has been given to gender questions in the region, I would argue that phallocentrism—and, more precisely, phallogocentrism—remains one of the characteristics most obviously shared by official "indigenous" histories and those of the "modern international tradition." This essay strives indirectly to challenge boundaries so frequently drawn between the two. See, for example, J. D. Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, part 1, ed. N. Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 2–3.

[10] Particularly at the end of the second section of O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*.

simultaneously reflect on the very disciplines within which we work and the methods that we use to produce histories? That is, any hope for conceiving new histories hinges, paradoxically, on assuming as consciously and critically as possible the very heritage of history—if only, then, to move somehow beyond it. In this context, I am not surprised to see that the contributions to the present volume dedicated to Chandler as a shaper of Cambodian historiography in our times, and centered on his "Songs," if not written by anthropologists *per se*, all could be said to have a decidedly anthropological orientation.

The most cursory bibliographical survey shows that spirit possession invites an interdisciplinary approach from scholars, and in turn encourages a marked, if not obsessive, disciplinary self-consciousness.[11] The potential of possession and its study to contribute in innovative ways to reconsidering (the writing of) history lies, I believe, in a somewhat paradoxical yet inevitable relationship between, on the one hand, a certain renunciation of (self-)consciousness and, on the other hand, an exacerbated self-consciousness—which seems to characterize those who study possession as much as those who undergo it. In any case, this paper does not attempt to present a history of possession in Cambodia. It aims rather to draw from the phenomenon of possession new vistas or insights for the study of Cambodian history. I hope to show possession *making* history as a discipline consciously open to the unconscious, a discipline not simply striving for mastery but instead sustained in and by a tenuous and dynamic balance between mastering and letting itself be mastered.

POSSESSION: REMEMBERING (IN) CAMBODIA TODAY

The varied and complex phenomena that I will collectively call spirit possession play an important role in the Khmer religious universe. Possession is typically seen by Khmer practitioners and spectators—including students of Khmer history and culture—as a remnant of ancient animist traditions predating the introduction of Indian textual religions early in the first millennium CE. While this is not *simply* false, possession is also a powerful syncretic force that has accompanied and driven the integration of diverse cultural phenomena throughout Cambodian history—as it has throughout the history of "India."[12] Possession comes before organized religion in

[11] M. Eliade's *Avant-propos* to *Le Chamanisme et les techniques de l'extase* constitutes one important marker in a long tradition of staking out disciplinary boundaries in the study of magic, sorcery, and what are often defined as subcategories thereof—shamanism and possession—in a concomitant drive to establish boundaries between these different "indigenous" disciplines. Eliade acknowledges the specificity of the domains of psychology, sociology, ethnology, and even, marginally, history in the study of shamanism; yet these distinctions are made in order to demarcate the field of history of religion as a sort of super-discipline: "In the end it falls on the historian of religions to synthesize all the particular researches on shamanism and to present a comprehensive view which is at once a morphology and a history of this complex religious phenomenon." M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques de l'extase* (Paris: Payot, 2002 [1968]), p. 11 (my translation).

[12] In a similar Southeast Asian context (Burma), B. Brac de la Perrière provides an historically well-documented argument against "seeing in the cult of the naq [*nat*] the product of a linear evolution rooted in animism or ancestral cults." B. Brac de la Perrière, *Les rituels de possession en Birmanie: Du culte d'état aux cérémonies privées* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1989), p. 27 (my translation). I am skeptical that research on possession in Cambodia could produce such a clear demonstration of the inadequacy of a linear developmental model, given that spirit possession in Cambodia has never been centrally organized to the same extent as

Cambodia, I would agree, but not in a chronological sense. We might better think of it as a manifestation of a substratum of belief that is beckoning to the future as much as harking from the past. In this way, possession is not just a religious activity.

It can be seen, for instance, as an indigenous way of making history: history in the broadest sense, as a social locus for communal memory and forgetting. Not unlike the "backward-looking" narratives that Chandler studies in view of developing a *feeling* for nineteenth-century Cambodian history,[13] possession constitutes a representation and interpretation of past events that itself constitutes an event to be interpreted in turn, a process of unearthing archives that produces an additional archive.

To the ethnographer, it is an object of study that puts the very means of study into question. Studied, it seems to study its studier. Steeped in tradition, bound by convention, possession, like ethnography, is a way of experiencing the radically other, or what I would call, in a particular sense, the non-self.[14] As such, it poses the

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the Burmese *nat* cult with its associated mediums. D. Bertrand, who has carried out sustained field research on the subject in Cambodia, has indeed been frustrated in attempts to establish a coherent pantheon of possessing spirits that could be situated historically in any systematic manner, or that could then allow for the establishment of a clear history of possession. See for example D. Bertrand, "Une Pratique Médiumnique de Possession dans le Cambodge Contemporain," in *La politique des esprits: Chamanismes et religions universalistes*, ed. D. Aigle, B. Brac de la Perrière, and J.-P. Chaumeil (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2000), p. 128. Nonetheless, a variety of more or less easily decipherable factors in Cambodia suggest conclusions similar to those reached by Brac de la Perrière in Burma. One of the more apparent obstacles for the linear interpretation is the part played by possession in certain Buddhist practices, which cannot simply be attributed to contact between two discrete systems, one animist and the other Buddhist. For recent discussions of this in Tantric contexts, see P.-A. Berglie, "The Avesa Ritual in Tantric Buddhism and Ritual Possession in Tibet," in *La politique des esprits*, pp. 25–34; and A. Padoux, "Transe, possession, ou absorption mystique? L'Avesa selon quelques textes tantriques cachemiriens," in *La possession en Asie du Sud: Paroles, corps, territoire*, ed. J. Assayag and G. Tarabout (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1999), pp. 133–47. In the concluding section of the present article, I will discuss a documented Khmer example that seems to point less to a transformation of Buddhism through contamination with possession (or Brahmanic practices, themselves perhaps tainted by "primitive" beliefs in possession) than to an organic tie between possession and Buddhism. While possession is frequently seen as the antithesis of Buddhism, in that the possessed loses control rather than mastering himself or herself (cf. R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, reprint [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990 (1988)], pp. 28, 36 ff.), in this case study I will consider how Buddhist practice may demonstrate ways in which ultimate mastery of the self leads to a realization of the non-self, and thereby a certain capacity to receive an other—a spirit, or, as we will see, a long-lost husband.

[13] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 54.

[14] This may seem to be a provocative formula, insofar as the non-self of Buddhist doctrine (*anattā*) is not generally associated with what, in European traditions, is known as "the other." It is not at all certain that the "self," which defines by counter-distinction the non-self (in Buddhism), is in any way the same entity or concept as the "self" that defines, by counter-distinction, "the other." However, by speaking of the experience of the non-self here, I mean to suggest the possibility of a situation, perhaps a general cultural situation, that is simply made manifest in possession, in which there exists no self in counter-distinction to the other. If we accept this proposition, possession as experience of the non-self would not imply an experience of the radically "other" as other than a nonproblematic self. Nor would it imply an "otherwise than being" in the Levinasian sense, whereby the self is only constituted in the encounter with the other, but rather an experience of the self (if we can still use this name) as radically depossessed of itself, emerging only as a site of radical *mise en abyme* of any possible subjectivity. This is another point at which I see (in the wake of a conversation with James

quintessential ethnographic question of sources in a new way. Mediums rarely note their sources. And when they do, it is in the spirit of infinite regress: one is often referred to a medium's teacher's teacher's teacher—or to the spirits themselves. And I would argue that this is not simply a result of inferior fieldwork habits or insufficient training. What mediums "achieve" through possession is possible only by means of an ethnographic technique rarely addressed by theorists in the field: what might be called a leap of faith.[15] So to undertake an ethnographic study of possession is always to engage in a meta-ethnography that threatens to shake any stable truths that may remain in the domain.[16]

WOMEN TELLING STORIES BESIDE THEIR HUTS

I have no pictures, no texts carved in stone, no hard proof to accompany what I will recount below. I have only stories—stories that have been told to me or performed before me, but which I have rarely told. I must ask the reader to believe me, to believe in me, to take me at my word, to take my word as a poor yet necessary substitute for events that have come and gone. This is not simply an unfortunate effect of circumstance in which the researcher moves from the field to the university serving as a medium between two incommensurable worlds. On the contrary, representation is at the very heart of the events I will relate. These are ghost stories. A redundancy one might say. For a ghost is always on the order of a story, and a story, for that matter, is always something of a ghost: it is never simply present on the page before the eyes or in the ears, nor is it ever simply absent. There is a truth to such fleeting events we cannot hold, but that truth resides in the telling.

The truth of possession is, in other words, a question of methodology. It is the possibility of a truth, the nature of which, or indeed the truth of which, would depend upon the way it was approached. Of course I am not suggesting that in order to learn about possession, one should spurn the traditional tools and methods of ethnography. We must observe, record, decipher. But insofar as the object of such study is what might be called a performative reality, a reality that vanishes into thin

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Siegel, and in reference to E. Balibar's "Citizen Subject" (in *Who Comes After the Subject*, ed. E. Cadava, P. Connor, and J.-L. Nancy [New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 33–57]) revolutionary potential in the study of possession: might it not allow us to glimpse the horizon of another type of history critically aware of, if not liberated from, the bonds of the Western philosophical tradition of the subject? At the very least, it should encourage further reflections on notions of individual and community in Southeast Asia, with respect in particular to theories of territorial boundaries and cultural belonging.

[15] This is a problem—or an opportunity—that Lévi-Strauss highlights early on in a certain Durkheimian tradition when he states, for example, that "the efficacy of magic implies belief in magic." C. Lévi-Strauss, "Le Sorcier et sa magie," *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1990 [1949]), p. 192. Which is to say, in the context of the present reading, that the ethnographer must believe in belief, insofar, at least, as the Zuni do.

[16] J. Favret-Saada writes admirably about this question, exposing the oxymoronic impossibility of "participant-observation," the inadequacy of "empathy," and the scholarly scam of what she calls the "Great Divide" between us (on the side of "knowledge," "science," "truth," etc.) and them (contemporary savages or Europeans hundreds of years ago, but certainly not today), and this only after exposing herself to bewitching and unbewitching. See J. Favret-Saada, "About Participation," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 14 (1990): 189–99. Many thanks to Lindsay French for bringing this article to my attention.

air as soon as it is not experienced as real, we have to go beyond ethnography in order to enter the medium's medium.

To begin with here, I will first retell one story as best I can. This is a story originally told to me in 1991 by a friend in Paris, a Khmer woman whom I will call Rasy. Through analyses of the story, I will then draw a number of preliminary conclusions, in the form of general themes or preoccupations that seem to me to be at the heart of possession in contemporary Cambodia. But since "preliminary conclusions" is an untenable oxymoron, and given the great quantity of work that remains to be done, I see these themes more as prognoses than results, as predictions or forecasts. After which, I will run through a series of fragmentary synopses of instances of possession I have documented, as a way of illustrating, albeit obliquely, these general themes. And to close not with proof but with a reading, I will attempt to retell a story that is older, yet so fresh, a well-known story written in Angkor Thom at the end of the twelfth century, but one that has never to my knowledge been read as a story of possession.

Rasy's Story

Rasy's story begins with the death of her father. As a girl, she was scared of ghosts, and when they chased her she would run to her father. When he died, he took the ghosts away with him. He died in the dry season under the Khmer Rouge. They buried him in the forest. When Rasy is sent back into the forest to collect vegetables several months later, she looks for her father's grave, but the rainy season has changed everything: she cannot identify the location. Rasy has night-blindness at the time, due to malnutrition caused by the Khmer Rouge, and perhaps also to psychological trauma. It starts getting dark in the forest—and then she hears her father's voice calling to her, and she sees him standing before her. Next, she is running after him.

The scene changes. In a flashback, Rasy is thirteen, reciting her lessons in bed. Shouting them, actually. Her grandmother appears and says she might as well stop studying because a man has come to marry her. Rasy protests. She has seen what marriage did to her cousin. She vows never to get married. She is at the top of her class. She sneaks out behind a partition to listen in on the conversation between her father and the suitor, a man her father's age. She hears them talking and peers out through a crack in the wood to see her father laughing. He says that if a girl studies she won't need anyone to take care of her.

Rasy was forced to marry much later under the Khmer Rouge, after her father had died. She told me that her first child, a son, is the reincarnation of her father. When the boy first learned to talk, he addressed Rasy, his mother, as if she were his child, and Rasy's mother, his grandmother, as if she were his wife. The presence of the father was verbalized in this way only in a brief phase of early childhood. As the boy grew, however, he increasingly came to resemble his grandfather.

Conjuring the Ghost

I will discuss this story as a series of three apparitions that accompany the transformation of a girl and daughter into a woman, wife, and mother. In the forest, in the front of the house, and in the son, each time it is the father who appears as a

benevolent conjured spirit in a time of need. These three scenes each involve a projection of the voice and then the vision of the father.

The events would seem at first glance to be beyond Rasy's control. They happen to her unexpectedly. The ghost appears in the forest and then in her son. Her father appears to ward off the unwanted suitor. Yet Rasy is also a strange agent in the (re)construction of her life. She may not actually call forth her father each time, but it is she who enables her father to appear. She is literally and figuratively the bearer of his voice and image. A sane woman by all accounts, Rasy, her husband tells me, incessantly recounts the story of encountering the apparition of her father's ghost. The narration is in itself a conjuring act, for it is the retelling of the first revelation of the ghost in the forest that evokes an earlier revelation of the threat of marriage in the home. The narration of the appearance of the forest ghost conjures the ghost of the ghost, that is, the telling vision of the father on the other side of the partition, which came first chronologically in Rasy's life.

Conjuring the ghost of her father is, in a preliminary analysis, a way of overcoming fear. Ghosts, spirits of the dead, were always running after Rasy, and she was always running away to her father. Then he died, and she stopped being afraid. Left with no one to run to, she who had always been pursued by ghosts was made finally to stop dead in her tracks and face them. As she faces the ghost of her father, all the living dead are finally put to rest. Rasy comes into her own, one might be tempted to say, at the death of her father. Yet she overcomes fear by bringing him back, or rather by actively receiving him when he returns, as if he were a phantom soldier come to support her in her struggle to survive in the deadly world around her: she keeps her father from abandoning her to the Khmer Rouge. Rasy's spirit of resistance is figured in the spirit of her father.

The vision of the father is experienced as a kind of healing of wounds inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, since Rasy's ability to see returns through the apparition. Her victory is two-fold as the return of her father, lost to the Khmer Rouge, signifies the return of her vision, which the Khmer Rouge had likewise taken from her. Rasy becomes a blind seer, an active-passive agent capable of converting loss into gain.

The conjugation of the active and passive recurs in the subject of abandonment. Did Rasy's father abandon her, or did she abandon him? There is a mirroring effect at work between the living and the dead. Like so many abandoned in the forest, like so many who disappeared with no trace, no memorial, no ceremony to ensure their life after death during the Khmer Rouge period, this dead man comes back to haunt his descendants. The dead will not let the living go until the memory of the dead has been marked in ritual, as in psychic terms. Once Rasy has (re)located her father's burial place, if not in physical space then in her mind, she is freed of all haunting ghosts. Only then can she let the dead go. The spirit is finally within her, rather than all around her. The exchange between subject and object is pictured spatially in her narration: she hears him calling after her, and then she sees him in front of her. It is not clear who precedes whom. The ghost calls after her. And she is pursuing him. Rasy is summoned by forces beyond her will, and yet it is she who pursues them. She who had always been afraid of ghosts is suddenly on their trail. It is at the very place where he had been abandoned that she discovers (recovers) the father who had abandoned her. She bids the ghost to bid her to follow. She conjures his voice to call her.

The flashback recalls, yet also foreshadows, the mutual abandonment and rescue of the father and daughter in later life. Marriage represents the abandonment of the

thirteen-year-old daughter by the father and vice-versa. First she hears the father's voice, then she sees him. As in the forest years later, coached by the insistent determination of the daughter, the father refuses to abandon her to a life she sees as worse than death. She puts words into his mouth. *I will study, I will study, I will study,* the little girl vows in reciting her lessons; *I will not marry, I will not marry, I will not marry,* she repeats, like a magic mantra. And her father reproduces her very thoughts, rejecting the suitor and saving the daughter from a conjugal hell. Though it may appear that Rasy's father determines her future in rejecting the suitor, in her very determination, Rasy determines her father's response. The part of the father in the daughter and the daughter in the father makes for a strange force in both lives, determined as they are by forces far greater than any singular body. Together, they incarnate a spirit of resistance to social violence. It is this spirit that will later appear as the spirit of the father to the daughter after his death.

The third apparition reincarnates the two preceding scenes. Again, Rasy first hears the voice and then sees the image of her father, this time in her son. This is a troubling representation of genealogical descent. The birth of the child is a simultaneous and two-fold birth of the parent as parent. First, in giving birth to her son, Rasy becomes a mother. Her own birth as a mother constitutes, moreover, the rebirth of her father. Having incorporated the dead father, Rasy brings him back into the world; she literally re-members him. She becomes a mother to her father.[17]

Coming into "her own" through an incorporation of the spirit of the other, Rasy's in-and-out-of-body experience (incarnating, as it were, the ghost) is in many ways paradigmatic of the phenomenon of spirit possession. The intangible power derived from the internalization of the spirit is inscribed in the spectral structure of genealogical descent as it reaches across partitions between the sexes and between the generations, between the natural and the supernatural, the real and the fictitious, the living and the dead. As for Rasy's vision, the "truth" of possession lies not only in the reality of cultural constructs, but in what might be seen as a political drive, an effective resistance to external violence carried out by giving passage to forces from another world.

Possessing the Spirit

The supporting themes of Rasy's story recur in diverse forms and manners in virtually every example of possession in Cambodia that I have encountered in field and archival research. In sum, these themes include abandonment, family ties, sexual transgression, conflation of the personal and the political, illness and healing, and studying or knowledge.

In the fragmentary synopses that follow, concentrating alternately on the origin of the medium's "gift" and on the nature and identity of the possessing spirit, I aim

[17] Though not strictly the case in Khmer linguistic practice, Benveniste described how it is common elsewhere (in Old French, for example) for the grandson to be called "little grandfather." "The notion remains alive in many societies that the child who is born is always an ancestor reincarnated across a certain number of generations; and even, theoretically, there is no birth, because the ancestor has not disappeared, he has only been eclipsed. In general, the re-apparition is made from the grandfather to the grandson: when a son is born to someone, it is the grandfather of the child who reappears, for which reason they bear the same name." See É. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions Indo-Européennes*, vol. 1. *Économie, parenté, société* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), pp. 234–35.

merely to suggest the complexity with which these themes are deployed in contemporary practices and beliefs.[18]

1 — Every three years, a ceremony is held in Pradak village of Banteay Srei district, Angkor, to pay homage to the community's protective spirits. In 1996, the ceremony was centered on a collective trance, in which an elder village medium initiated two other women whose spiritual ancestors are considered to be in the same line (*juor*) as her own. This medium is well-known in the area. She first went into trance more than thirty years ago when her husband left her. She is often called upon to heal, to interpret the past, and divine the future. One of the new mediums, an older unmarried woman, had been suffering from an eye infection. According to the principal medium, the sick woman's spiritual ancestors were at the source of this illness. Her recovery was dependent on her submission to the spirits, that is, on her letting them possess her, or then on her possessing them. In addition to the women's personal spiritual ancestors, community spirits residing in neighboring temples also came to speak and dance through these and other mediums during the night-long celebration.

2 — A few months after this collective ceremony, I documented an individual healing ceremony performed by the same medium in Pradak. Suddenly one day a village woman in her mid-forties became very ill. The family called the medium to cure her. During the lengthy ceremony that ensued, the medium was successively possessed by the patient's father, her mother, her *krou kamnaoet* ("birth guru," the spirit who presided over her own birth), other relatives, village spirits, and neighboring temple spirits. Each spirit proposed a diagnosis and cure for the illness. Her father, who had died under the Khmer Rouge, recounted the circumstances of his death and complained that no funeral had ever been performed on his behalf. He was cold, and requested clothing. The deceased mother expressed concern for the father and nostalgia for her children. The village guardian spirit requested that the villagers leave enough space between their houses for him to walk. Provincial authorities were at the time widening the road running through Pradak, such that each lot lost a few meters of frontage along the road. As villagers were shuffling to recover space lost in front by widening their lots on either side, little room was left for circulation between the fences separating one house from the next. The *krou kamnaoet* attributed the woman's sickness to a spell cast upon her in her youth. He advised her to take herbal saunas and drink herbal elixirs to expel from her body the wax that had been magically lodged within her. The patient had been married for many years, but, to her dismay, had never borne children. Everyone agreed that this diagnosis pertained to that particular "sickness," by which something was stuck inside her. A Khouc, "Naughty one," the mischievous guardian of nearby Mebon temple, announced that the illness was due to her husband's infidelity. The guardian spirit of the local pagoda advised the woman to offer food to her deceased ancestors. Another spirit of nearby Phnom Bakheng temple requested some coconut juice.

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[18] This is by no means an exhaustive list of such themes in contemporary Cambodian spirit possession. Although its results have yet to be published in synthetic form, the socio-ethnographic research teams of the ex-Department of Culture and Research of APSARA (Authority for the Protection and Management of the Angkor Region) has been systematically documenting ritual practice at Angkor since 1999. This research provides an important database for further research.

3 — In 1994 I attended a celebration at Vat Veang Chas, at Oudong, sponsored by a Khmer-American family to commemorate their first return to the country since the war, and to raise money for the pagoda. During the evening of the two-day-long celebration, a ceremony was performed to call the spirit of Neak Ta Khlang Moeung into a local medium, an older man who was assisted by his wife. A national hero, Ta Khlang Moeung is the general who committed suicide in order to round up an army of spirits to combat Siamese invaders in post-Angkorean lore. A living man who joined the dead in order to summon them in support of the living, Khlang Moeung is the paradigm of the medium. He is a common subject (or object) of possession across Cambodia today (and as Teri Yamada has pointed out, beyond the physical limits of the country).[19] Incarnating Khlang Moeung's spirit, that is, calling up this dead man in support of the living, the mediums of Khlang Moeung can be seen to reenact the spirit's heroic act.

4 — Another spirit commonly summoned by mediums in contemporary Cambodia is Preah Ko. This is another legendary figure from the Middle Period incarnating loss and potential recovery. A palladium believed to safeguard the kingdom, Preah Ko is the sacred bull, in whose stomach sacred manuscripts are hidden, and who was stolen by the Siamese around the end of the sixteenth century. One notable example of possession by Preah Ko, among many that I have seen, is that of a young man I noticed trembling as he was watching a possession ceremony in the central *vihāra* (worship hall) of Kien Svay Knong pagoda, just outside of Phnom Penh, during New Year's festivities in 1995. In the crowd, the frail, effeminate man would periodically begin crying. His companion told me he was a medium for Preah Ko, and that the bull still lived in Thailand, but since the elections (the first post-war elections), the bull had taken to flying over Cambodia three times a year to monitor the situation. That year, the man said, Preah Ko was to return to oversee the country permanently.

5 — The last example I will give here involves two women who had met for the first time during the same 1995 New Year's festivities at Kien Svay Knong pagoda. The older woman is the medium of a spirit called Champa Moni. She had first become the medium of this spirit four or five years before. Suffering from an indefinable sickness for months, which no doctor had been able to cure, she had a vision one day of Champa Moni. From this vision, she understood that in order to recover from her illness she would have to accept the spirit's power over her. She built an altar to the spirit in her home and began to make him offerings on a daily basis. She recovered and was thereafter endowed with the spirit's powers for healing others. As is very often the case, her healing consisted in the transformation of herself as the possessed into the possessor. When I met her, she lived alone in a small thatch hut in a village across the Mekong from Kien Svay. It was around the time of her illness, she told me, that her husband had left her to live in Phnom Penh. Their only child, a son, had followed him.

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[19] T. Yamada, "The Spirit Cult of Khleang Moeung in Long Beach, California," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. E. Guthrie and J. Marston (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 213–25.

The younger woman had become the medium of a spirit named Duong Jivan about one year before. She had built an altar in her home, but the cult remained relatively private. She had not yet used the spirit's powers to heal others. From what I could understand, this woman had been abandoned by a husband or a lover on the Thai border. She told me that Duong Jivan is, in fact, a one-star general. That New Year's day, he had sent a message through Neak Ta Kamhaeng, or Hanuman, Rama's monkey general in the *Ramayana*, who carries messages swiftly and who is venerated as a protective spirit in an annex sanctuary on the Kien Svay temple grounds. The message was from her spiritual husband, a military chief currently living on a mountain at the Thai border. The message was that he loved her.

The two women had not known each other before the encounter at Kien Svay Knong on New Year's day. It was only then that they discovered their spiritual relation. Champa Moni, the spiritual master of the older woman, is, it turned out, the father of Duong Jivan. After this discovery, the younger woman called herself the foster child of the older woman, literally, her "dharma child."

RE-GENERATING HISTORY

In the following, I would like to suggest ways in which the stories recounted above may be conceived in relation to political and social history. Let me acknowledge first that the particular context in which each of these documented episodes occurred—namely, turbulent contemporary Cambodia—is of undeniable importance in engendering the event itself; any history of possession in Cambodia would necessarily take such context into account. But I will not concentrate on this dimension of the question at hand. My emphasis will be, rather, on how the event of possession itself may engender history. By "engendering history," I mean, in the first place, that possession makes things happen, and I am not referring to ritual or even daily events, or changes in individual people's lives; I mean that possession incites historical trends, movements, political events. And in the second place, I argue that possession gives voice to characters or "subject positions" that are silenced in traditional histories, be they ancient/indigenous or modern/international. Since it allows for the inscription of other voices, often feminine voices, into (something like) history, possession has the potential to *make history*, literally and figuratively, insofar as it threatens or promises to upset established notions in the field.

Now, for such an inversion of cause and effect to take place (for us to see possession engendering history as much as history effecting possession), we must, I believe, take on J. Favret-Saada's challenge: " ... one has to accept to actually take up a position rather than imagine oneself there ... for the simple reason that what occurs there is literally unimagineable ... "[20] These words are directed specifically to the ethnographer who strives to "empathize" with the natives, but who in so doing maintains and relies on " ... some distance between the subjects ... because one is not in the other's place ... he or she tries to represent or imagine what it would be like to be there ... "[21] Of course, this can be seen as a naive demand: one can never take up the position of the "other"—this is the very definition of subjectivity. There must be "some distance" between subjects; those who fail to recognize this can only be deluding themselves. Yet even so, there is a certain necessity to Favret-Saada's

[20] Favret-Saada, "About Participation," p. 193.

[21] Ibid.

appeal. At the very least, all distances are not the same. In a not-very-far-removed context, J. Derrida has spoken of the inevitable ethnocentrism of the ethnographer: an ethnographer cannot help but succumb to ethnocentrism; succumbing to ethnocentrism is not in itself the ethnographer's fault; however "if no one can avoid it, if no one is therefore responsible for succumbing to it, even in the slightest, this does not mean that all ways of succumbing to it are equally pertinent ... "[22] Taking Derrida's lead, we can perhaps interpret Favret-Saada's reference to an all-too-convenient, all-too-easy distance that the ethnographer relies and thrives on as implicitly suggesting the need to be conscious of the different forms and expressions of this distance, and to choose critically between them. I would add that this consciousness and these decisions can themselves be part of a radical transformation in relations between the "subjects." Yet what I find most appealing about Favret-Saada's injunction is her call to take up a literally "unimaginable" position: beyond all rational calculation, yet without being simply irrational, because such a blind leap is nonetheless the consequence of a rational assessment of the ethnographer's situation. And this is where I would hope to be able to widen the challenge of such a call so that it touches the historian. In other words, I would hope that historians could learn from this methodological predicament—which is also an opportunity—of the ethnographer. One might argue that, structurally, a historian is necessarily up against a much more implacable distance than the ethnographer, since the subjects with which a historian interacts are not his or her contemporaries and the events under study took place before his or her time. Yet this would be to miss the fundamentally political character of Favret-Saada's—and for that matter, of Derrida's—appeal. The rhetorical recourse to "simple reason" is grounded in a belief in the politics of academics, at least insofar as taking up a position on the side of the object of one's study is a risky academic move: "one takes the risk of seeing one's ethnographic project vanish."[23] Yet, as Favret-Saada argues for ethnography, this is the very point, I believe, at which history can be made in history today. To illustrate my point, I will return to two of the most prominent sources for Cambodian history: George Coedès and the Phimeanakas inscription.

Reading Coedès Reading

In 1942, in Tome II of his monumental *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, George Coedès published a revised transliteration and translation of the Phimeanakas inscription, previously published by L. Finot. This Sanskrit inscription dates to the end of the twelfth century, and the stele on which it is carved was uncovered in 1916 at the base of the Phimeanakas temple (whence the name), situated in the enclosure of Angkor Thom's royal palace compound. As far as we know, it is unique among Cambodia's more than one thousand ancient inscriptions in that it was written by a woman about a woman. Following are Coedès's introductory comments to the text:

> This poem was authored by Queen Indradevī, who succeeded her younger sister Jayarājadevī as wife to King Jayavarman VII. It is essentially a panegyric of the younger sister, retracing her biography and recalling her

[22] J. Derrida, "La Structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 414.

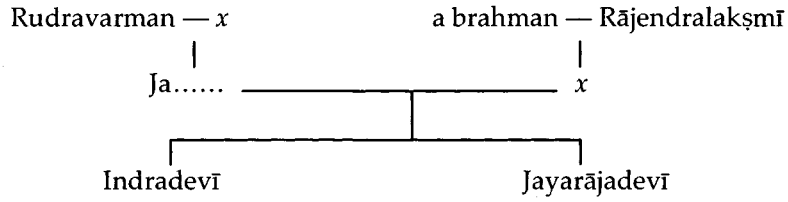
[23] Favret-Saada, "About Participation," p. 195.

good works; among these good works, the last, signaled by a change in meter (st. XCI), is the coating in gold of a monument designated as the "ornament of the Earth" (*vasudhātilaka*), which could well designate the Phimeanakas, and which would explain why the stela was placed at the base of this edifice.

[...]

The text begins with three stanzas of invocation to the Trikāya (I), the Buddha (II), and Lokeśvara (III). The following 26 stanzas (IV–XXIX) contain the eulogy, fairly banal, of Jayavarman VII. That of Queen Jayarājadevī, which comes next, corresponds in part to the most mutilated passages of the stela (XXX–XCIV), and up to stanza XLVI, the legible text is too fragmentary to allow for a sustained translation. We can manage however to discern the chain of ideas.

After two stanzas praising the queen's beauty (XXXI–XXXII) comes a genealogy (XXXIII-XXXIV) which can be summarized as follows:



The name of the maternal grandmother reappears in stanza XXXV, in an entirely ruined context. We can not deplore enough the loss of stanzas XXXVI–XXXIX concerning the Chams (XXXVI) and which may have given the reasons for Jayavarman's departure for Champa, more specifically for his journey to Vijaya (Bình-định), from which place stanza LXV will soon inform us he returns to come to the rescue of King Yaśovarman II.

As I have already indicated elsewhere,[24] these events took place before the consecration of Jayavarman VII, therefore prior to 1181 CE.

The departure of her husband was for the princess the occasion to manifest her conjugal fidelity and to give herself over to mortifications which are the object of a long development (XL–LVIII). She apparently practiced asceticism according to Hindu rites until the moment at which her elder sister, Indradevī, initiated her in the Buddhist path (LIX–LX). It would seem that she then performed a ceremony aiming to evoke before her the image of her absent husband and that she succeeded (LXI–LXIV).

The following stanzas are of great historical interest, and I used them in a previous study of this period of Cambodian history.[25] They relate the precipitated return of Jayavarman, prompted by the news of intrigues threatening the reigning king, Yaśovarman II (LXV), the death of the latter (LXVI), the patience of Jayavarman and his wife during the reign of the usurper (LXVI–LXVII), the attack of Jaya Indravarman IV, king of Champa (LXVIII), and the death of the usurper (LXIX), and finally the victory of

[24] G. Coedès, "La stèle de Prea Khan d'Angkor," *BEFEO* 41 (1941): 255–301.

[25] G. Coedès, "Etudes cambodgiennes XXIV: Nouvelles données chronologiques et généalogiques sur la dynastie de Mahīdharapura," *BEFEO* 29 (1929): 321–25.

> Jayavarman over the Chams and his consecration (LXX). Having recovered her husband, the queen multiplied her pious or charitable works (LXXI–XCIII), among which we note theatrical representations based on the *Jātaka* (LXXIII), the creation of a community of nuns recruited among abandoned girls (LXXIX–LXXX), a series of magnificent gifts made to the kingdom's principal sanctuaries (LXXXI–XCI), and a great number of portrait-statues of her relatives and friends (XCII–XCIII).
>
> After her death (XCIV), her elder sister Indradevī succeeded her in the favors of the king (XCV, C). As L. Finot has said, "it is possible for us to appreciate her knowledge of Sanskrit and her writer's talent, because the *praśasta* engraved on the stela of Phimeanakas is her work (CII)."[26] The fact is that this text is remarkably correct, while nonetheless written in a language much more simple than the productions of the prince authors of the Ta Prohm and Preah Khan inscriptions, and especially of the pundits who composed the inscriptions of the Prasat Chrung.[27]

In this synopsis, Coedès does note the information regarding the queen and her activities provided in the inscription. And I would like to note that this type of detailed information about a woman in ancient Cambodia is not merely rare; it is unique. Yet Coedès quite clearly privileges the king's activities. Though the eulogy of Jayarājadevī "corresponds in part to the most mutilated passages of the stela," Coedès explicitly laments the loss of only those stanzas deemed to be of great historic value, those regarding the Chams and Jayavarman's departure for Champa. Indradevī's account of her younger sister's activities during the king's absence incites more doubt than interest in the twentieth-century historian; he writes that the queen "apparently" practiced asceticism, and it "would seem" that she performed a ceremony in which she "would seem" to have succeeded. Coedès's doubts concerning the queen's activities are not due to the fragmentary nature of the passages, which provide more than enough information to conclude that, in Indradevī's mind, the queen *practiced* asceticism, *performed* a ceremony to evoke the image of her husband, and *was successful* in doing so. Coedès's grammatical formulation here—the verb *sembler* (*il semble*: it seems) followed by the subjunctive and signifying doubt—is in stark contrast to his synopsis of Jayavarman's return and subsequent events "of great historical interest." The verity of the epigraphic record on this latter account is not questioned; the stanzas are, in fact, "used" to write the history of the late twelfth century.

This discrepancy between Indradevī's actual composition and Coedès's account thereof is telling, and deserves, I believe, further consideration. It is Coedès, not Indradevī, who introduces a narrative shift between the two principal sequences of events, i.e., the queen's religious practices and the king's return. There is no meter shift at this point in the poem, and, I will argue, no internal semantic justification for identifying a paragraph and tone change in the synopsis of the narrative. For Coedès, the king's return is precipitated by the news of intrigues in the kingdom; consequently—and inconsequently, as the event is written off as a non-event by the

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[26] L. Finot, "Inscriptions d'Angkor: X, Phimãnàkàs (k.485.Est.n.241)," *BEFEO* 25 (1925): 374.

[27] G. Coedès, "Grande stèle de Phĭmãnàkàs," *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 2 (Paris: EFEO, 1942), pp. 161–62 (my translation). I have modified Coedès's spellings of Khmer temple names to correspond to regular English usage.

historian—the queen is reunited with her husband. From Indradevī's perspective, I will argue, the king's return is prompted first and foremost by Jayarājadevī; it is "by her exertions" that the queen "recovers her husband" (*pratilabhya yatnair/ nāthaṃ*, st. LXVII).

My goal here is not to denounce Coedès for being more interested in men than women. He was necessarily a product of his times; and his work in Khmer epigraphy and history was extraordinarily extensive and truly original. More than anyone else, Coedès is responsible for constituting the field now known as "Khmer Studies." I aim simply to highlight the need to renew research on Coedès's sources and legacy, and to indicate paths such new research might take. The reading I am proposing, and which, I maintain, corresponds more precisely to Indradevī's reading of the history at hand, carries a number of consequences for research in the field. First, it gives fuller meaning to the queen's subsequent acts recounted in the inscription. Second, it suggests new ways of conceiving innovations in representation and means of governance in Cambodia during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. And lastly, to return to the main theoretical point of this paper, this new reading provides a template for understanding possession as a means of engendering history. The consideration of possession in this context offers a vision of history in which events might be perceived to be motivated not solely by rational causes, and identifiable and verifiable not solely through traditional methods of assembling and comparing diverse types of data, but might *also* be recognized as driven by apparently irrational, esoteric, internal forces that escape traditional types of "objective" analysis. After a translation of the passages in question, and a few brief remarks thereon, I will address these consequences in greater detail.

Reading Indradevī Reading

The following translation, established with the invaluable assistance of S. Goldman, differs slightly from Coedès's 1942 French translation, itself a revised version of Finot's, published in 1925. Despite efforts by successive generations of scholars to reconstitute the damaged text, translation remains hypothetical at several points. Therefore, instead of filling in gaps by assuming intended meanings, I have opted to render the text more or less literally. Passages that are too fragmentary to sustain even hypothetical translation are summarized in parentheses.

> XXXVIII–XXXIX. (Mention of King Jayavarman, of the difficult route [to Champa], and of the sea of armies.)
>
> XL–XLIII. (The *tapas*[28] of the queen, her devotion to her husband, who is probably absent, her crying.)

[28] The term is derived from the verbal root *tap*, "to give out heat," and generally designates asceticism, religious austerity, bodily mortification, intense meditation. The following gloss given by M. Eliade, with reference to the seventh- and eighth-century philosopher Vyāsa, is useful in understanding the specific event in which I am most interested in this inscription: "asceticism proper (*tapas*, physical effort used as a means of purification) distances impurities and inaugurates a new power over the senses, that is the possibility to surpass the limits of the senses (clairvoyance, clairaudience, divination of thought, etc.) or suppress them at will. (Vyāsa, ad II, 43)." M. Eliade, *Le yoga: immortalité et liberté* (Paris: Payot 1954), p. 62 (my translation).

XLIV–XLVI. (Mention of a reservoir or pond on the shore of which the queen devoted herself to *tapas*.)

XLVII. Then ... her mother, like the Earth, and her father, firm ... [like] Mount Sumeru, and her elder sister Śrī Indradevī, [like] the Ganges, who knew ... trembled.

XLVIII. Again ... by appointed servants ... this faithful wife, of irreproachable conduct, could not be ... restrained.

XLIX. ... followed then by *Vṛtti* (Conduct) ... *Prīti* (Joy) ... restraining ... she was like *Siddhi* [Magical Power, Success] incarnate, walking ahead.

L. ... her husband ... whichever difficult *tapas*, she succeeded in it, repeated it, desired it, did it easily ...

LI. "... Sītā having recovered Rāma [then] separated from him ... May I be like Umā ... united with my beloved," such was [her vow].

LII. Her beauty ... scorched by *tapas*, but neither destroyed nor diminished.

LIII. ... the primal seed ..., growing with the opportune rain of the spirit ... the act ... made thin by her observances, she obtained the fruits ...

LIV. Walking ... on the great ninth [day],[29] she followed the path ... *tapas* ... manifesting the conduct of faithful wives.

LV. Then ... he [who] would be one with[out?] passion, removing with his hand the covering of the topknot ... announced that the desired path was attained.

LVI. Even having known by the power of *tapas* she manifested that the arrival ... was imminent, she attained ... for it is duty and not success that occupies the mind of great people.

LVII. ... Indravarman,[30] Lord of Lavodaya,[31] disciplined like Lava, on the verge of practicing *tapas* ... was diverted [from doing so] by her, to avoid the mistake of repetition.

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[29] Of the month of āśvayuja, the last day of the festival of the goddesses Lakṣmi, Kālī, and Sarasvatī, also called Durgāpūjā. Cf. S. Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920) (note G. Coedès).

[30] Perhaps Nṛpatīndravarman. This person, compared with Lava (son of Sītā, to whom the princess was compared in st. LI) must have been a son of Jayavarman VII and Jayarājadevī (note G. Coedès).

[31] Probably, Lavo = Lopburi. This name figures on the inscription of Preah Khan, st. CXVI. See Coedès "La stèle de Prea Khan d'Angkor," p. 296 (note G. Coedès).

LVIII. Having approached her who, from the preeminent tree of *tapas*, had picked the flower of her good intention, the servants, brilliant like a long path, led her to her mother's first residence, according to tradition...

LIX. Instructed by her elder sister Śrī Indradevī and beholding the Buddha as the beloved to be attained, she walked the calm path of Sugata which passes between the fire of torment and the sea of suffering.

LX. With concern for ... she worshipped the Buddha, first in the form of the elephant, then removing the covering of his topknot, then desiring emaciation ... finally following his own path.

LXI. ... having seen the fire flaming in the Fire Hall ... she attained the desired goal.

LXII. ... her beloved, more beautiful then Bhīṣma, before her eyes, in her mind,[32] she obtained that suffering become pleasure.

LXIII. ... attracted by her husband, as if obtaining, in rivalry ... the land ... revealing her inner self, like an earth divinity, through her brilliance.[33]

LXIV. ... by her merit, by her extreme devotion to her husband ... she incessantly implored ... by the force of her vow.

LXV. Yaśovarman having been ... by a retainer seeking to obtain royal power, the king returned promptly from Vijaya to rescue this sovereign.

LXVI. But Śrī Yaśovarman, having already been robbed of the kingdom and of his life by this ..., he stayed, waiting for the propitious moment to save the earth heavy with crime.

LXVII. ... having by her exertions recovered her husband, and having put an end to her efforts, this very divine woman desired him who was about to draw the earth out of this sea of misfortune in which it was submerged.

LXVIII. Śrī Jaya Indravarman, king of Champa, arrogant as Rāvana ... having an army led by chariots, went to the country of Kambu equal to the heavens in order to fight.

LXIX. ... made harsh by Yama who resides in the Southern Region, and weakened by the sun, in order to capture in battle ... he killed that king[34] who suffered the consequences [of his previous acts].

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[32] *Smaraṇe*: literally, "in her memory."

[33] Though G. Coedès's translation assumes a syntactical coherence absent in the original, it does render more directly what I believe to be the general meaning of this stanza: "Comme éprouvant de l'émulation à l'égard de son époux arrivant au pays ... comme une divinité chtonienne manifestant sa nature par éclat ..."

[34] The usurper mentioned in st. LXV–LXVI (note G. Coedès).

LXX. Having by his patience in misfortune [or: by vessels conveying across...] vanquished in combat this [king of Champa] who had a boundless ocean of warriors, after having received the royal consecration, he [Jayavarman] enjoyed, by the conquest of Vijaya and other countries, the purified earth, which could be called his home.

LXXI. ... the queen, who had accomplished the burden of meritorious acts, ... through the abundance of her riches ... lavishing their fruits on all the people, desiring the welfare of the world ...

LXXII. [... of excellent *tapas*...] having obtained this lord of men, her husband, grateful, made [the earth] full with a shower of magnificent gifts, like the Ganges.

LXXIII. ... her vow, having manifestly obtained the Buddhist fruits ... *tapas* ... she enjoined her dancers [to perform ...] with dances of the Jātaka tales.

LXXIV. ... by all ... those who, because of the decadence of learning, were crazed by objects of the senses, saw, thanks to her having quickly informed the king, their [mundane] bonds broken, applied themselves to learning and attained the quality of *dvija*.[35]

LXXV. ... accepted ... her good deeds accomplished ... her conduct prescribed by tradition and the engendering of her acquired merits earned her glory resplendent throughout the worlds.

LXXVI. She spread gratitude in distributing the riches of the king across the earth; and even the king himself distributing riches ... belonging to the queen: the two made manifest that they helped each other.

LXXVII. ... generous, she put the essence of his marvelous wealth at the disposal of the gods and petitioners ... [bestowing on] worthy persons, with effort, [gifts] of lamps for worship equal to [those in] the royal treasury.

LXXVIII. In the field ... the processional [statues] of the gods placed in a tower [decorated] with precious jewels, with thirty-six ... *kaṭṭī* of gold, brilliant as fire.

LXXIX. Having adopted by the hundreds hosts of young girls, injured and abandoned by their mothers, as if they were her own, she raised them in [a village] called Dharmakīrti, renowned for its dharma, rich in happiness and wealth.

LXXX. In this way, she brought into religion, with clothing, gifts and prescribed rituals, the village of Dharmakīrti, transformed with its

[35] That is, enjoyed the privileges accorded the three upper castes (note G. Coedès).

established boundaries, famous for its religious teaching, forever maintaining the honor of the Dharma.

[LXXXI–XCII. Enumeration of offerings made by Jayarājadevī to specific temples across the kingdom]

XCIII. This intelligent woman erected everywhere [statues of] her mother, her father, her brothers, friends, relatives, and members of her family whom she knew or had heard spoken of.

My reading of these stanzas will itself be fragmentary—which is to say selective. My general concern here, with regard to possession, is to explore the question of agency and the formulations of and interactions between activity and passivity. In the first place, however, we should note that Indradevī devotes twenty-four stanzas (XL–LXIV) to recounting her younger sister's religious practices, aimed specifically at effecting the return of her departed husband. In contrast, and only after Jayarājadevī conjures the appearance of her husband, there is just a single stanza that mentions what Coedès identifies as the cause of Jayavarman's return, news of palace intrigues threatening the reigning king. Though we cannot discern many details, the first fragmentary stanzas of the passage cited above clearly and directly associate Jayarājadevī's *tapas*—through which she nearly loses her senses—with her husband's departure and sought-after return. In stanza LVI, after a sustained sixteen-stanza exposition of Jayarājadevī's perilous austerities, we read that the arrival of Jayavarman is imminent (*gamanaṃ samīpaṃ*), and, most specifically, that his wife understood this through the power of her *tapas*.

Jayavarman's return is further foreshadowed—or precipitated, and this is a crucial question in the text—by his wife's conversion to Buddhist practice recounted in stanzas LIX–LX. Notably, in stanza LIX, Jayarājadevī "perceives," or perhaps "experiences" (*avekṣamāṇā*) the Buddha as the "beloved" (*priyaṃ*) to be "brought about," "attained," or even "mastered," "subdued" (*sādhyam*). Though there is nothing unusual about the use of this last word, *sādhyam*, in this context, it is important to note that its semantic core is clearly grounded in mastery or subjugation: Jayarājadevī attains the beloved Buddha in part—and at least partly etymologically—by overcoming him. A similar tension between mastery and submission will characterize Jayarājadevī's recovery of her husband, the future king, in subsequent stanzas. In stanza LXII, her "beloved" (*priyaṃ*) again appears to her visually, but this time the beloved is Jayavarman himself. Through her devotion to the beloved Buddha, Jayarājadevī has conjured the beloved future king, the one substituting for the other in a religious-political trope well known in ancient Cambodia. Yet one of the unique aspects of this inscription is that here we see the future queen effecting the transfer. As she "perceives" (*avekṣamāṇā*) the Buddha, she preconceives the vision of the king "before her eyes" (*sākṣāt*). And here too mastery and submission coexist and even reinforce each other. Jayarājadevī recovers her husband by her exertions (*pratilabhya yatnair/nāthaṃ*, st. LXVII), yet it is the future king who comes to recover her. As he appears before her eyes, she is likened to the earth goddess (*kṣitidevateva*, st. LXIII), even presented as rivaling the land (*deśa*) itself in her act of receiving the king home again. As she recovers Jayavarman in herself, in the vision of him she conjures up before her eyes, Jayarājadevī is also recovering him

in the country, in the "land of Kambu" (*kamvudeśam*) of stanza LXVIII. And it is this earth—the earth which, in the text, she is (*kṣitim*)—that the queen wishes him to save from misfortune (st. LXVII). By stanza LXX, Jayavarman has fulfilled his wife's wishes; he has vanquished enemies and conquered enemy lands, and, newly consecrated as king, he has "enjoyed (i.e., reigned over) ... the purified earth" (*bhuvaṃ viśuddhāṃ vubhuje*).

It is ultimately mastery of herself that brings Jayarājadevī to the non-self: a dispossessing of the self that involves making room for the other—in this case, the Buddha and/or her husband. And it is this movement, this ultimate fusion of mastery and submission, that not only brings Jayavarman home but also brings Jayarājadevī back to "herself." Embodying the earth, the queen gives body to the king, and in so doing literally gives new form to an old trope of power and sexual difference by which the king conquers and possesses the land as his wife.[36] Like Rasy, the woman possessed by her (dead) father, Jayarājadevī is a sort of blind seer, an active-passive agent capable of converting loss into gain and transforming pain into pleasure as she conjures the departed to the rescue.

In light of this interpretation, I would like to consider two of the queen's subsequent acts recounted in the inscription. I aim to contextualize these acts, first in relation to what I am reading as Jayarājadevī's active-passive experience of a form of possession—what I will call her "conversion"—and then in relation to a series of enduring questions regarding Cambodian history in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The first of these acts is the foundation of a girls' orphanage in Dharmakirti village and the concomitant conversion of this village to Buddhism. It was through religious practice, and ultimately Buddhist practice, that the queen, herself an abandoned woman, overcame her abandonment. In taking abandoned girls on as her daughters, and bringing them up in the Buddhist faith, the queen seems to have prescribed a similar remedy to others. Bringing these girls into Dharmakirti village, the queen brings the whole village into the Buddhist religion, following the very model of her own personal experience.

Thus we have here a complex and intriguing exposition of late twelfth- to early thirteenth-century Cambodia's conversion to Mahayana Buddhism. This text appears at a key moment in Cambodia's religious and political history, when Buddhism came, in a relatively abrupt manner, to replace Brahmanism as the official religion in a syncretic animistic culture. Mahayana is thought to have been instituted as the religion of the court at the instigation of Jayavarman VII, perhaps under the influence of his family, including his queens. It was around this time, or soon thereafter, that Theravada began to show its first signs of penetration in Khmer cultural expression. Cambodia as we know it today was in its embryonic stages.

The inscription of Phimeanakas represents the conversion of the future queen not as a rejection of pre-existent religious beliefs and practices, but rather as an act that draws its force from them. The climax of the passage cited above is not any formal or doctrinal conversion to Buddhism, which is not given any particular stress, but another kind of conversion, the transformation of the body brought on through

[36] The trope is common in Cambodian Sanskrit epigraphy. The specific Buddhist formulation is undoubtedly related to the common iconographic association of the Buddha and the earth goddess. The latter is frequently depicted on the Buddha's pedestal in modern Cambodian statuary and painting, but also in much older Cambodian—and other Southeast Asian, Indian, or Sri Lankan—Theravadin and Mahayana contexts. See E. Guthrie, "Outside the Sīmā," *Udaya* 3 (2002): 7–16.

asceticism, which, when enacted based on the model of the Buddha himself, leads to the middle path. The ultimate conversion operates, or is operated by, a retrieval of the other through the mastery of the self to the point of attaining a (state of) non-self. The conversion takes place not simply in the absence of the future monarch, but more precisely because of his absence. The abandoned woman comes into "her own" by conjuring the image or the spirit of the departed man within her. It seems plausible, based on what we are able to decipher from the Phimeanakas inscription, that the queen contributed significantly to the official conversion of the country to Buddhism, and, moreover, that some form of possession served as a vehicle for this religious shift. In converting to the way of the Buddha, the queen effectively converts her husband's politico-religious image. Indeed, she refers to these two male figures with the same expression, such that, in textual terms, a meaningful parallel is established between them. Once he became king, Jayavarman was to be represented alternately as Buddhist worshipper and as a Buddhist image to be worshipped throughout his long reign.

The erection of portrait statues is another of the queen's acts that takes on fuller meaning in the context of this reading, and which, in turn, further illuminates this particular period in Cambodian history. One of the defining characteristics of Angkorian history, for the ancient Khmer as for the modern historian, was the widespread erection of statues of Brahmanic gods named after members of Khmer royalty who were usually already deceased. A slight but significant twist would seem to have been given to this tradition during the reign of Jayavarman VII, during which statues were no longer all sculpted as they had been traditionally, with the well-established, more or less stylized, iconographic features of the gods, but were also made physically to resemble particular human beings—living, and, it would seem, also deceased members of the royal family. This artistic shift was clearly associated with the religious shift from Brahmanism to Mahayana Buddhism in the court, and so also associated with new strategies of governance introduced at that time.[37] The Phimeanakas inscription offers us a glimpse into the history of this remarkable innovation in tradition. After noting that her sister erected statues of "her mother, her father, her brothers, friends, relatives, and members of her family whom she knew or had heard speak of" (st. XCIII), Indradevī boasts that she continued the tradition herself: after her sister's death, the new queen erected statues of her deceased sister, along with statues of "herself and the king in every city" (st. XCVI). It seems to me that we may deepen our understanding of the portrait-statue by situating it in relation to the transformative event related in this inscription. Jayarājadevī's asceticism aimed at and succeeded in summoning the absent prince's image before her eyes. In a similar, though more concrete, manner, the portrait-statue serves to make a human being (in, or in addition to, a god) present. The logic of rendering the absent present underlies, of course, traditional Khmer statuary in general; the portrait-statue can be seen to have made this logic manifest in pushing to it to a certain realist extreme. In this sense, there is a thematic and logical link in the sequence of the text, between Jayarājadevī's formative, transformative act and the creation of portrait-statues. Scholars have generally seen the portrait-statue as a vehicle for promoting the king's power throughout the land. This was undoubtedly

[37] For more details, see A. Thompson, "Portraits of Cambodia: Angkor Revisited," in *What's the Use of Art?: Asian Material and Visual Culture in Context*, ed. J. Mrázek and M. Pitelka (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 179–213.

the case, but it seems to me that the Phimeanakas inscription provides us, at the very least, with a glimpse of the specific modalities through which the portrait-statue functioned to this end. In the portrait-statue we see political events effected by religious practice. The institution at this moment in Khmer history of the portrait-statue can, in effect, be interpreted as a sort of commemoration of Jayarājadevī's transformative active-passive experience, and as providing a model or support for its perpetual repetition.

Spirit possession is widely associated with statue worship in contemporary Cambodia, be it through small images placed on mediums' private altars or public statues housed in Buddhist pagodas, ancient temples, or shelters outside of demarcated religious grounds. A number of cults with which I am familiar recall the structures I am hypothesizing here. The cult of Preah Ang Thom at Vat Vihear Suor, in which the Buddha statue is said to harbor the spirit of Norodom Sihanouk, provides a nice example. In possession, mediums of Preah Ang Thom accompany the (recently abdicated) king in his voyages abroad, and, inevitably, his return home. The power to effect return is, of course, at the heart of possession. Like Rasy, as well as the medium of Preah Ko or that of Duong Jivan mentioned above, for example—all of whom mirror the image of Jayarājadevī —the mediums of Vihear Suor incarnate the beloved as a means of bringing him home. In this, we have another perspective on the uncanny anachronicity of possession noted earlier. Always beckoning to the future *in* harking back from the past, possession irrevocably submits to the authority of tradition, as to traditions of authority—and yet remains undauntedly subversive thereof.[38]

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[38] In this, possession could be seen to crystallize a cultural construct or process that has long intrigued scholars, whereby apparently unquestioned respect for tradition does not necessarily imply any sort of straightforward entrenchment in the past or submission to authority. Together, a number of contributions to the present volume illustrate this issue well. Firstly, David Chandler's characterization of nineteenth-century Cambodians as "backward-looking" points up the uneasiness that the coexistence of contradictory attitudes and gestures might incite in the modern historian: "I don't mean to suggest [by 'backward-looking'] that they were nostalgic for a verifiable golden age ... I mean only that their social conduct was based on ideas, techniques, and phrases which were passed along through time and space like heirlooms, with the result that people were continually reliving, repeating, or 'restoring' what was past—in ceremonial terms, in adages, and in the agricultural cycle." See Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 54. In Chandler's reading, nineteenth-century Cambodians were not stuck in the past; rather, insofar as the "past" was relived, repeated, or restored, it perpetually constituted the present—and the future, making for a troubling confusion of the temporal divisions necessary to the traditional historical enterprise. This is the "vast cycle of temporality" that Anne Hansen, in her article for this volume, highlights as a key factor in deciphering Cambodian perceptions of violence and moral order. She writes: "In this Buddhist understanding, the origin of extreme social violence (and its eventual cessation) is connected with the trajectory of the Dhamma in time and relative to the past and future history of human moral behavior." See Hansen, "Gaps in the World: Harm and Violence in Khmer Buddhist Narrative," in this volume. This sort of temporal condensation, by which "past" and "future" are, in important ways, experienced together in the present, is also at work in the contemporary phenomenon of religious building projects examined by John Marston in his article here. This is apparent in the way so many of the projects appeal to both the Angkorian past and the future coming of a savior, such as the future Buddha Maitreya. Marston's piece makes a further insightful contribution in helping us think through the related paradoxical compatibility of adherence to fixed hierarchical structures and individual agency. Marston, "Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos."

RETURNING TO "INDIA SEEN FROM THE EAST"

As should be evident in the choice of examples studied in this paper, I am not calling for a "new" history in which women would take the place of men as actors on center stage. Nor do I aim to present women as the backstage directors apparently dependent, yet secretly manipulating, the men in their lives, and so the course of history. Such approaches would not represent in my mind a new history but rather a reerection of the old. I am trying instead to suggest ways of engendering histories that would widen and deepen our perspectives on how "things happen." If we are studying Cambodian history—how things have happened in Cambodia—it seems only logical today, and indeed necessary, to study how Cambodians have seen things happening. Surely the way Cambodians have seen things has affected, if not effected, those very things seen. Yet this return to the study of *indigenous cults* leads us now beyond the subject so intensely studied by Mus in the 1930s, although, as I mentioned earlier, Mus himself proposes, in a seemingly overdetermined way, the reading that I am saying remains to be done. Perpetually ahead of his own time, Mus does not stop at the apparent conclusion of his brilliant analysis of the ancestor-rock/*linga*/statue. "India Seen from the East" ends, rather, with a poetic evocation of the feminine. Despite the inescapable predominance of the phallic institution so graphically embodied by the *linga*, despite the necessity of reading the story the rock-*linga* tells as the history of power over territory in Southeast Asia, something else, Mus suggests, remains to be read.

The last section of "India Seen from the East" is entitled "Survivals and Depth of the Indian Influence in Champa." Like a tide, Mus would seem to be saying, Indian influence flooded into Champa, and then ebbed away. He notes the vestigial survival of Indian gods in contemporary Cham legend and practice in order to demonstrate not the overriding nature of that influence, but rather the ease with which it melded with indigenous culture. The Indian contribution was profound, he says, but only as it was assimilated into an indigenous matrix. And so he emphasizes not the persistence of Indian influence, not even the vestigial traces, but instead a return, a return to the indigenous, a shedding of the veneer of formal Indian influence that reveals the ever-present indigenous cultural constructs. In this conclusion, Mus resorts to two examples:

> Beside their huts, the womenfolk still recount the exploits of Indra, although sometimes in unexpected guise.[39]

This is a very striking and somewhat mysterious, seemingly gratuitous, image. When returning to the indigenous today, Mus turns, without comment—that is, as if intuitively—to the womenfolk beside their huts. While the explicit, evident thread of his argument here leads to an analysis of the trajectory of the Brahmanic god Indra from Indian literature to Cham epigraphy to contemporary Cham historical legend, the enduring memory remains that of the womenfolk beside their huts—as if it is this *image* of the woman, not the man, and the hut, not the temple, more even than the tales that are told, that embodies the very possibility of cultural memory. Now, of course, this return to the woman as incarnation of an intact indigenousness, like the erection and assignation of some feminine or maternal essence, participates fully in the phallocentric order Mus analyzed with such insight. From the trope of the king

[39] Mus, "India Seen from the East," p. 51.

returning from battle to unite with the earth, to the invocation of the maternal line to legitimize kingly power, the phallic dream always longs to recover the lost feminine origin. Yet in Mus, there is also something more or other than a drive to ultimate mastery—there is his "touch," his feel for the existence of other perspectives and other worlds, and his knack for leaving the questions open at the end. Beyond the knowledge of this or that which Mus undoubtedly transmitted to Chandler, this is what I see as the heart of Mus's legacy in Chandler's work.

Mus's concluding citation in "India Seen from the East" is of a Sanskrit hymn to the goddess of Nha-Trang, recorded in a Cham inscription. He presents the text as an example of the sophistication of Cham culture—not of Sanskrit culture. The goddess of Nha-Trang was originally an indigenous goddess given the Sanskrit name Bhagavatī Kauthāreśvarī during the heyday of the culture, as Mus calls it, but she is worshipped still, and still recognized today as the indigenous goddess of Nha-Trang. We might think it paradoxical that Mus invokes this astonishing Sanskrit hymn to Bhagavatī Kauthāreśvarī, consort of Siva, as a way of returning to the matrix of Cham culture, yet his indomitable drive to compare cultures (he relates the composer of this stanza to a learned monk at Chartres) indicates that Mus is searching for something universal in this virtuoso study of a cultural singularity, that he is searching for something he cannot, indeed, simply master:

> Pertaining (or belonging) to him who is the Lord of what is and what is not, having as real nature the quality of being the origin of the development of existence on earth ... being one with the being and the non-being that exists in the world, primordial potentiality of being and non-being ... Oh Blessed One, be as it were, by your magic power, the vanquisher of us who are prostrate before you.[40]

This is where Mus is dreaming of heading, after the rock and the *linga* and in the hopes of getting closer to the indigenous, to a point of potentiality of being and non-being, before or beyond, that is, the hard proof of presence that continues, despite us all, to make history. And this is, I believe, the direction that led to, and continues to lead from, David Chandler's "Songs."

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[40] Ibid., p. 52.

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THE KING WITH HANSEN'S DISEASE: TALES OF THE LEPER IN COLONIAL CAMBODIA

Sokhieng Au

Many of the essays in this collection seek to understand the experience of a historical moment through the framework of folk stories. As did David Chandler in his classic article "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," this essay uses what Penny Edwards terms "alternative readings of the past" (folktales, along with oral history, legend, normative poems, and song) to write a history of colonial Cambodia. The historiographical use of such "alternative readings" allows us to recreate historical experience, if not actual historical events. Included in my analysis are additional standard archival sources, such as published medical reports, that I also read with a mind to this alternative voice. Part of my goal in examining folk and medical tales in a single story is to treat with parity the truism that the French did not live in a less "sensational" (meaning-driven) world than did Khmers, just as Khmers did not live in a less "experiential" (historical-event driven) world than did their French colonizers.

The stories in this essay all focus on the leper in colonial Cambodia. These stories have villains, heroes, adversity, and sometimes suspense. At their center, they feature disease. I am working under the assumption that all narrative production, including my present narrative and the stories *within* this narrative, serve to both constitute and reflect human experience. So what is being constituted here? I am making two general arguments for the historical moment we are examining: colonial Cambodia at the turn of the twentieth century. First, the legitimation of particular worldviews through narrative is an active process for both Khmer and French, and the stakes involve not only the treatment of lepers, but, more broadly, the proper understanding of disease, politics, social behaviors, and moral order. Second, the language of the folktale and the language of the medical tale, particularly at this historical moment, have many similitudes. They are parallel texts that produce/*authorize* certain forms of cultural authority. As Charles Briggs has argued, "the manner in which stories are presented and used is often contingent on their being framed as embodiments of shared beliefs ... that is, such framings enter into strategies by which individuals and groups attempt to lend legitimacy or even

hegemony to particular narratives."[1] The narratives I use come from a range of disparate sources—oral tales, the Judeo–Christian Bible, the colonial newspaper, popular Western fiction, scholarly medical journals—yet they all tell the story of how their authors, their authenticators, and their audiences created meaning not simply for the one disease of leprosy, but also for their experience of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Cambodia (and Indochina for the French).

While the narrative aspect of a Khmer folktale needs little exposition, it bears explaining that the other sources in this essay are also narratives. In other words, they contain actors, settings, and actions. The protagonist undergoes a transformative process. The how and why of the protagonist's changed situation, the emplotment of these tales, contains the worldview of their creators and their intended audience as much as folktales do for theirs. These texts illuminate the social world they narrate, but they also reveal the ways in which these social worlds interact or fail to interact; the boundaries of the stories are also boundaries of particular social orders. As Chandler's "Songs" so elegantly did for late-nineteenth-century Cambodia, this essay attempts to understand the social and moral order of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Cambodia. Like Penny Edwards (in this collection), I attempt to understand shifting spaces and boundaries, but those of individual and collective bodies (physical bodies) rather than (social) geographies in colonial Cambodia. I also draw on Anne Hansen's project (in this collection) of exploring the questions of both how and why narrative can function to recapture history as experience.

These tales reflect the dynamic and unstable nature of social and moral order at this moment in time (e.g., turn of the twentieth century), as France imposed colonial governance on Cambodians and scientific transformations overwhelmed Western medicine. The interactions during this period concern cultural interchange at multiple levels: between elite and "common" folk, colonizer and colonized, Buddhist and Christian, scientist and lay person, and doctor and patient. These stories illuminate the social world they narrate, but they are also sites of negotiation. In other words, those who make, accept, and duplicate these stories actively present and construct a shared understanding of sociality. Whether a medical case study or a folktale, the narrative creates communities. It instantiates particular worldviews, legitimates private and professional practices, and validates specific claims to authority.

Healing as Art, Healing as Science

Before the eighteenth century, medicine in Europe was undoubtedly an interpretive art. Western medicine underwent rapid transformation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, as it became increasingly identified as science with the growth of fields such as biology, chemistry, and epidemiology. Such a transformation in part compelled a denial of the interpretive nature of medicine. It also required a deliberate adjustment of the role of the medical doctor in relation to religion, to "barbarism," and to traditional healing and folk remedies. The stories

[1] Charles L. Briggs, "Introduction," in *Disorderly Discourse: Narrative, Conflict, and Inequality*, ed. Charles L. Briggs (New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA, 1996), p. 14. This collection from anthropological linguistics is mainly concerned with the use of narrative in resolving conflict.

that doctors told had to reproduce explicitly a proper hierarchy of medical as well as social knowledge.[2] In Cambodia, these hierarchies were skewed, a reflection of the multiple layers of domination and negotiation at work in the colonial domain, as well as the many culturally distinct socio-theoretical concepts of health and healing.[3]

The colonial researcher writing on leprosy was operating at a time when germ theory was just becoming widely accepted in Europe; the etiology for major diseases, such as tuberculosis, was moving away from "hereditary essentialism" to "contagionism"; and illnesses were becoming manifestations not of moral failings but of natural processes.[4] Even for the specialist, the shift to germ theory was not instantaneous. Further, the scientist needed to establish the relevance of his colonial observations to the metropolitan members of his audience; he needed to demonstrate his competence with current scientific developments at a time when contagion as a medical concept was de rigueur. In the colony, where the doctor existed in a distinct social framework apart from his patient, the colonial tendency to naturalize social and political differences within biological categories amplified racial and hereditary views of disease causation.

In other words, bacteria may have implied contagion, yet "experience" within the colonial network encouraged an emphasis on environment, race, and heredity. These several "causes" of a disease were morally freighted. Even though contagion could be ascribed to bacteria (which were morally neutral), the transfer of the bacteria from one person to another was still a causal notion. Individuals who exposed themselves to contaminated individuals were easily portrayed as immoral, particularly for a disease such as leprosy. Contagion itself would become entangled with French anxieties over cultural identity, race, and the disease. For example, one researcher claimed that a converted Vietnamese missionary caught leprosy simply from tending his deceased, unconverted, leprous father's corpse.[5] Clearly, the corpse's heathen status, a peculiar fact to mention so prominently in such a short case study, was significant to the writer. While French colonial scientists were largely anticlerical, they nonetheless identified a greater cultural remoteness and danger with the non-Catholic indigenous masses.

While negotiating the cultural milieu of Cambodia as a colonial official, the Western doctor was also making increasingly ambitious claims to being a scientist in the global arena, in part by adopting a specialized lexicon. That lexicon was justified as a means of creating precise meaning but it also served to bar production (and reception) of medical domains to specific audiences. Medical case studies are in

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[2] Kathryn Hunter Montgomery, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Donald Pollock, "Physician Autobiography: Narrative and the Social History of Medicine," in *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, ed. Cheryl Mattingly and Linda C. Garro (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 108–27.

[3] The importance of the socio-theoretical constraints on medical concepts has been well developed in comparative histories of medicine. See Paul U. Unschuld, *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 249.

[4] David S. Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), Introduction.

[5] Edouard Boinet, "La lèpre à Hanoi (Tonkin)," *Revue de Médecine* 10 (1890): 611. This is highly improbable, as infection usually requires prolonged close contact with bacteriologically active infected individuals. Also, it usually takes four or more years after exposure for the first symptoms to appear.

themselves a particular subset of this medical and scientific lexicon. Increasingly, scholars have examined the medical narrative as a window to individual, immediate experiences of affliction and healing; the ethnographer, sociologist, linguist, and anthropologist have all grappled with the patient's story.[6] As Arthur Kleinman writes, "illness narratives ... impart the innately human experience of symptoms and suffering."[7] This body of scholarship focuses on narrative as a means of reorienting medical practices to make them more effective in the ultimate goal of alleviating human suffering.

The stories in the present essay are not necessarily concerned with the relationship between healing as a skill and a patient's understanding; they focus instead on the socio-political context of disease and affliction.[8] My analysis builds on both the current diverse scholarship on narrative and medical praxis and the historical use of narrative, such as that employed by David Chandler in "Songs," to understand the wider social context of colonial Cambodia. In other words, I will apply the theoretical concepts developed to understand the relation between narrative and medical praxis to a history of a disease in colonial Cambodia. Medical narrative, I argue, works particularly well in both the realm of history and praxis because it negotiates the relationships among affliction, action, politics, and moral order.

In a medical case study, the doctor erases the patient as the protagonist, focusing instead on the pathogen or disorder as the agent, while the patient becomes the setting of the narrative. This shift of personal narratives of illness into narratives of germs and diseases can be characterized as an invention of Western biomedicine.[9] (The success of this effort today is debatable, the purpose even more so.) This narrative conversion did not only garner authority for medical practitioners through the discursive techniques of science, it also ostensibly eliminated the social stigma associated with certain diseases for the benefit of the patient. A most pertinent example for us: Western doctors at the turn of the twentieth century increasingly referred to leprosy as Hansen's disease (in honor of the first man to identify, in 1873, the leprosy bacterium). Physicians assumed that the connotations of Hansen's disease could be circumscribed so that they would relate only to the bacterial infection; the label "leprosy" was supposedly much less objective and more stigmatizing. Yet, I am arguing here that these "less objective" connotations were, in part, Western imports. Thus, ironically, colonial scientists introduced the "leper as unclean" notion into Cambodia at the same historical moment as medicine more

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[6] See, for example, Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1988); Cheryl Mattingly, *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience*, Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Cheryl Mattingly and Linda C. Garro, eds., *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Montgomery, *Doctor's Stories*; Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993).

[7] Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, p. 9.

[8] This is influenced by the conceptual distinctions among the individual body, the social body, and the body politic formulated in medical anthropology. See Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, "Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, new series 1 (1987): 6–41.

[9] As traditional medical practitioners are increasingly being influenced by the cultural authority of Western science, those medical practitioners' illness narratives are also shifting toward impersonal "case studies."

broadly was trying to efface just this stigma. The medical case studies of the leper in the early twentieth century will provide evidence of this transformative path in medical narrative.

TRANSGRESSIONS

These transformations within Western medicine serve as one of the backdrops to our story. In the foreground, the French colonial services were attempting to transform disease and what counted as "useful" disease narratives in Cambodia. In doing so, it had to compete with and supplant existing indigenous narratives of health, sickness, and death. Ultimately, traditional stories of the leper in Cambodia provided alternative visions for mediating experience with the disease. One of the most popular stories, that of the Leper King, provides a salutary model for understanding how Khmers viewed the disease. The tale, as consolidated from several sources, goes as follows:

> There was a great Khmer king who, during a reception, received a visit from a mandarin named Naga (or Neak, Niak, Naja, etc.). The mandarin failed to show him respect, and the king, in fury, chased him with a sword to cut him down. As the king struck the mandarin, the mandarin spit venom in his eyes. From this venom, the king became afflicted with leprosy. A renowned religious hermit, the Maja Eysey, took pity on the king and sent one of his disciples down from the mountain to cure him. The disciple made a great pit in the ground and boiled some water. He instructed the king to bathe in the pit in order to return to full health and beauty. The king, skeptical, refused. In order to convince the king, the monk decided to demonstrate the effect of the bath on himself. He gave the king three powders to throw into the water in succession once he had entered. When the monk entered the water, however, the king carelessly threw all three powders in at the same time. His reckless actions turned the monk into stone. The king ordered the stone monk thrown into the wilderness. When his disciple did not return, the Maja Eysey went to the palace and surmised what had taken place. In anger he cursed the king, willing his disease to be ever present and incurable.[10]

As other Cambodian historians have discussed, this story is likely a corrupted folk memory of a true historical figure, a real king with leprosy.[11] Scholars have speculated that this folk story is based on the ancient Angkorean King Indravarman II (successor to Jayavarman VII; Jayavarman VII is famous for building many of the

[10] Dr. Angier, "La lèpre au Cambodge: Croyances et traditions," *Annales d'Hygiène et de Médecine Coloniales* 6 (1904): 176–77; David Chandler, "Folk Memories of the Decline of Angkor in Nineteenth-Century Cambodia: The Legend of the Leper King," *Journal of the Siam Society* 61 (1979): 55; A. Kermorgant, "Notes sur la lèpre dans nos diverses possessions coloniales," *Annales d'Hygiène et de Médecine Coloniales* 8 (1905): 634; Ritharasi Norodom, "L'évolution de la médecine au Cambodge" (MD thesis, Librarie Louis Arnett, 1929), pp. 66–68. Etienne Aymonier, in his personal notes of 1884, seems to have recorded one of the earliest versions of the leper king folk story. See: archives of the Societé Asiatique, Aymonier collection. (The Aymonier archives have yet to be systematically catalogued.) David Chandler, in "Folk Memories of the Decline of Angkor," notes several more modern versions of the story as well.

[11] Chandler, "Folk Memories of the Decline of Angkor."

most prominent temples in the Angkorean complex). Indravarman II's reign was a period of significant change in the Khmer kingdom, as Angkor fell into steep decline.[12] We may suppose that the popularity of the story in late-nineteenth-century Cambodia lay in its resonance with the socio-political situation during Indravarman's rule so many centuries earlier. Cambodia had been recently colonized by a foreign power after two centuries of civil war. Like the reign of Indravarman, this was an age of displacement, warfare, and disorder in the kingdom. The popularity of the story would indicate that it is a Khmer culture-wide phenomenon.[13] The tale is normative. The recurrence of specific mythic elements in this and other folktales intimates certain Khmer cultural readings of the diseased individual and the disease, which I will enumerate briefly.

THE LEPER KING AS AFFLICTED KINGDOM

At the turn of the twentieth century, the king was both the moral and political center of Cambodia. The fulcrum of the Khmer state, he was also the apex of the microcosm that reflected the macrocosm. Within the story of the Leper King, his inability to return to "perfect health and beauty" reflects the kingdom's inability to restore itself to harmony. It is also a story of disrupted hierarchy. Kingships in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia are essentially triangles of power. The Sangha (the Buddhist monastic order) jealously controlled the Theravada Buddhist Dhamma (the law), the king legitimated his rule through his claims to uphold the Dhamma, and the people followed the king as the divine reflection of Dhamma. The story of the Leper King can be read as a breakdown of this triumvirate. The mandarin (the people) fails to respect the king properly. The king fails to respect the monk (Dhamma/religion) properly. Each failure leads to a further destabilization of the existing order. In other words, within the hierarchically ordered Khmer cosmology, each level within the hierarchy failed to behave properly. The king, the moral as well as political center of the kingdom, is afflicted because moral and political order has broken down.[14] The tale is about a damaged society.

According to Khmer folklorists, three levels of power—magical, meritorious, and royal—constantly interact and direct the fate of characters in most Khmer oral tales.[15] These three levels of power also apply to the three levels of society we just identified in the tale. Magical power belongs to the people, meritorious power to the monks, and royal power to the king.[16] Although the Leper King falls victim to magical

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[12] Ibid., pp. 59–60.

[13] Angier, in his 1897 study, observed that the story of the Leper King was well known throughout the countryside. National Archives of Cambodia, collection of the Resident Superior of Cambodia (NAC RSC) 2174.

[14] For an analysis of the icon of the Leper King as a metonym for universal kingship, see Ashley Thompson, "The Suffering of Kings: Substitute Bodies, Healing, and Justice in Cambodia," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 91–112.

[15] Solange Thierry, *Le Cambodge des contes* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1985), chapter 16.

[16] See, for example, the myth of the Buddha and the *nagaraja* (naga king) Muchilinda. Lowell W. Bloss, "The Buddha and the Naga: A Study in Buddhist Folk Religiosity," *History of Religions* 13 (1973): 36–53. The somewhat chaotic powers of the naga are originally at odds with the Buddha. Yet, ultimately, the Buddha converts the naga, providing order and harmony to the anarchic and primordial forces of the naga. Thus, the *nagaraja* shields the Buddha during a storm. The power of both naga and Buddha are necessary to divine kingship.

power, which then is reinforced by the monk's curse (meritorious power), he does not lose his royal power. He remains king.[17] While the three levels of power interact, none subsumes the other completely.

On the level of the individual body, this tale indicates that moral transgression as well as physical taint causes leprosy.[18] Although the original transgressor—the mandarin—can be seen as a subordinate, the disease itself afflicted a revered figure. Further, the mandarin's identification as Naga (or Naja), a mythical snake, suggests that the original transgressor is primordial or mythical.[19] The etiology of leprosy, like many other diseases in Khmer culture, is supernatural. Thus, transgression leads to affliction. The transgression, however, is social as much as moral; both disrespect and unworthiness determined the affliction. The disease did exceptionalize, but it did not necessarily denigrate the sufferer, as it did in Western Christendom.[20] The living lepers in Cambodia were certainly somewhat separate from "normal society," but they clearly interacted with it as well. Foreigners in the late nineteenth century frequently observed, with puzzlement, the lack of fear that Khmers felt in encountering lepers. The indigenous population continued to live, work, eat, and sleep in close proximity with lepers; to Westerners, this seemed astonishingly foolhardy.[21] The story of the Leper King, as well as these observations, indicate that the leper in Khmer society was on some level stigmatized but, in contrast to French society, segregation usually occurred within the bounds of community.[22] But why, in French society, was the leper so ostracized? Scholars who have studied the "leper as outcast" trope usually locate its origins within the Judeo–Christian tradition.

Ultimately, the king's authority rests upon both the power of the primordial yet terrestrially bounded naga and cosmological, divine Buddhist law.

[17] Thus, in this analysis I am disagreeing with David Chandler's contention that Indravarman's possible affliction with leprosy would have made his kingship illegitimate. The association between royal unworthiness and leprosy is culturally specific.

[18] Physical taint is recognized as a cause of many common diseases. It is not "contagion" in the Western sense.

[19] The mythical figure of the naga also attempted to trick the Buddha in human form. Ang Choulean, "De la naissance à la puberté: Rites et croyances Khmers," in *Enfants et sociétés d'Asie du Sud-Est*, ed. Jeannine Koubi and Josiane Massard-Vincent (Paris: Harmattan, 1994), pp. 153–65.

[20] Mark Gregory Pegg, "Le corps et l'autorité: La lèpre de Baudoin IV," *Annales: Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 45 (1990): 265–88. Pegg argues that in Western Christendom, a leper could never be crowned king because of the association with moral unworth. In contrast, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1174 anointed and crowned the leper Baldwin IV. In the Bible, the only king to contract leprosy, King Uzzi'ah (also called Azari'ah), abdicated his kingship after contracting the disease (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26:19–21).

[21] Dr. Angier, "Le Cambodge: Géographie médicale," *Annales d'Hygiène et de Médecine Coloniales* 4 (1901): 33. See, for example, Angier, "La lèpre au Cambodge," and Charles Meyer, "Lepers in Troeung," *Etudes Cambodgiennes* 13 (1968). See also NAC RSC 144, 1898, 2174, 12623.

[22] Liora Navon, "Beggars, Metaphors, and Stigma: A Missing Link in the Social History of Leprosy," *Social History of Medicine* 11 (1998): 89–105. This is supported by a more recent anthropological study in neighboring Theravada Buddhist Thailand, which found that, before the 1950s, sufferers of leprosy encountered ambivalent, rather than the severely stigmatizing, reactions. A shift to severe stigmatizing after 1950 is tied to the spread of Western (biomedical) acculturation.

THE JUDEO–CHRISTIAN LEPER

> The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside of the camp.
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> —Leviticus 13:45–46; Bible, Revised Standard Version

> And a leper came to him [Jesus] beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.
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> —Mark 1:40–43; Bible, Revised Standard Version

The leper, as argued by Mary Douglas, is a prime example of sacred contagion. The disease "is not caused by the wrath [of God], the disease and the associated uncleanness are *circumstances* which call down the wrath of God."[23] Sacred contagion, as in any kind of contagion, is a "causal" process. The contagion seeks the unfortunate individual. While the disease may be misfortune or punishment, it is not *holy* punishment. Rather, the leper's failure to purify himself is what incurs holy wrath. There is a focus in the Bible on repentance and conversion, on action *after* the disease has materialized that determines moral worth. Douglas argues that the scribes who produced Leviticus transformed the existing (and thus natural?) revulsion against the leper into a bureaucratized control of social denunciation. It placed within the hands of priests alone the power to declare and exile lepers. Controlled denunciation served a social function by preventing excessive spurious accusations and the resulting fragmentation of society.[24] The important point for our purposes is that such leprosy management puts an emphasis not on the originating cause of the disease, but on actions after it has been declared. It is a disease that, within Judeo–Christian culture, demanded complete exclusion from society.

Thus, while Khmer and Western narratives both portray affliction as a very bad thing, the source of fear is distinct. The story of the Leper King emphasizes improper behavior leading to the disease. The European tradition stresses the leper herself or himself as a source. The fear that leprosy engendered in French colonial society was wildly out of proportion to the physical threat it posed, particularly when compared to other extremely contagious and lethal diseases present in Indochina. Although tuberculosis, cholera, and the plague killed many more people with greater frequency and attendant turmoil, leprosy still engendered more colonial discussion and regulations in Cambodia.[25]

This fear was in part due to the Western colonial vision of the leper as symbolic outcast, contaminated and unclean, all concepts born within the Judeo–Christian

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[23] Mary Douglas, "Sacred Contagion," in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 91 (emphasis added).

[24] Ibid., p. 99.

[25] For a global review of this fin-de-siècle leprosy scare, see Zachary Gussow, *Leprosy, Racism, and Public Health: Social Policy in Chronic Disease Control* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), Introduction.

tradition.[26] However, part of modern medicine's goal was to "rationalize" this stigma. And yet, before biomedicine could rename Cambodia's lepers "Hansen's disease patients," it first had to conjure up something approximating the Judeo–Christian leper to convert. French researchers had to imagine something they could both read and translate. This creature conjured up, this "biomedical leper," was neither quite the unclean outcast, nor the Hansen's disease patient. It certainly was not the Khmer leper, the *menuh khhlong*. In colonial Cambodia, the story of this "biomedical leper" would incorporate Vietnamese and Khmer living lepers, narrating them as both bizarre monsters in a fleeting medical tragedy, as well as banal and familiar villains of the colonial drama.

Found in colonial regulations, newspaper articles, and popular fiction, this biomedical leper was largely created in the medical literature. For instance, a 1903 scientific research article set in Indochina, published in a medical journal for an audience of colonial doctors and public health officials, begins with the following "true" story:

> A young Scotsman, whose parents had never left Scotland and whose family was quite well-off, one night in a drunken state met a woman with whom he had relations. This female, on returning the next day to demand money, revealed, to his horror, that she was the woman he had met the night before. He had before him a woman disgustingly disfigured by leprosy, having lost her fingers, nose, ears, [and] palate. Six months later the marks of leprosy appeared on him [the Scotsman] and he died a leper.[27]

This short story is fascinating on many levels. On the one hand, it is several cautionary parables in one, an exercise in multiple alterities. To which danger did the Scot succumb—general moral dangers or those of the colonial endeavor? The predatory woman, the colonial subject, sexual promiscuity, alcoholism, and disease all operate in this short tale. Secondly, in consideration of current estimates for the onset of leprosy's symptoms following initial contact (anywhere between four and twenty-four years), the story strikes the modern reader as quite outlandish. Notice that this story parallels the tale of the Leper King in an interesting way. Incorrect behavior—social transgression—leads to disease for the protagonist. However, the central transgression related in the story is still the failure to exclude the leper from his society. The disease has simply been embodied and externalized in the form of an Asian female. Further, what was unseen or seemingly harmless at the time of contact ultimately destroyed the Scot. Indeed, the scientific evidence presented in the remainder of the article continues this theme. The author would conclude that simple

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[26] Michel Foucault has discussed the role of the leper as symbolic outcast in several of his works. For example, in *Discipline and Punish*, part 3, chapter 3 ("Panopticism"), Foucault writes "[I]t is the peculiarity of the nineteenth century that it applied to the space of exclusion of which the leper was the symbolic inhabitant (beggars, vagabonds, madmen, and the disorderly formed the real population) the technique of power proper to disciplinary partitioning." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 201. See also Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988).

[27] Thiroux, "Contribution à l'étude de la contagion et de la pathogénie de la lèpre," *Annales d'Hygiène et de Médecine Coloniales* 6 (1903): 564. The story is most likely spurious. Such a fast rate of development for Hansen's disease is rare. Current estimates are that leprosy takes approximately four to twenty years from time of first exposure to exhibit initial symptoms.

visual diagnoses of Khmer and Vietnamese women indicating good health were not sufficient guarantees of actual healthfulness. Clinical exams revealed that, even when the leprosy bacillus was present in the vaginal mucus, native women frequently showed "no signs of inflammation on their genital organs."[28] Clearly, European men should not be lulled into a sense of security by the appearance of healthfulness in such women. Rather, these men needed to be vigilant in maintaining distance from the colonial subject in order to avoid disease.

It was quite common for leprous indigenous women to serve as a focal point of colonial anxieties, particularly since some scientists believed leprosy, like syphilis, was transmissible as a venereal disease. In 1890, a researcher in Indochina provided three "case studies" of European males who had developed leprosy through contact with colonized populations. He gave a brief case history of each man, focusing mainly on his personal relations. The primary cause of contagion, he argued, was that each of the afflicted had cohabitated with or married an indigenous woman. He reached this conclusion despite two significant complications that he briefly noted but dismissed—first, the "apparent" continued health of one of the "creole" wives and, second, the prior employment of an afflicted European male as a doctor at a leprosarium.[29] Thus, a healthy creole wife was the source of her European husband's leprosy while showing no signs of the disease herself. In the other case, the leprosy of husband and wife is again caused by the Asian wife, although the husband was a doctor at a leprosarium. Fraternization with indigenous women—the failure of these men to maintain physical and social boundaries between colonizer and colonized—led to their diseased states. Just as in the story of the Leper King, the disease of the individual body reflects the disorder of the body politic.

While the story of the leper in the Khmer context is that of disrupted social hierarchy, so, too, in the biomedical context it is a story of social hierarchies. The originating lepers that figure prominently in these medical cases are indigenous and female; the new cases are European and male. In these clinical cases, lepers are markers of the boundaries of colonial rule. With little supporting rationale, many researchers baldly assumed that mixed marriages and mixed children would lead directly to leprosy among the white populations. As one researcher flatly remarked of the Mekong Delta, "[I]f we [have yet] to record leprosy cases among the Europeans living in Cochinchina, it's because the Annamite is still maintained at a distance ... But it must not be forgotten that the number of *métis* [mixed-blood] grows every day."[30]

As in the Bible, leprosy management in colonial Indochina was about separating the clean and unclean, or the worthy and unworthy, but these divisions were now made along racial lines. For Europeans, treatments for the disease would also divide along similar fault lines and be expressed through a mélange of narratives. Once again, these narratives mix literary styles and archetypal plots. The Judeo–Christian Bible provides an elaborate lepers' purification ritual (Leviticus 14:1–57). The leper can be cleansed (if not cured), and once cleansed, can be reintegrated into normal society. Holy wrath is incurred when the leper fails to follow the prescriptions for

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[28] Ibid., p. 573.

[29] Boinet, "La lèpre à Hanoi," pp. 618–19.

[30] Dr. Cognacq and Mougeout, *De la lèpre en Cochinchine et dans la presqu'île Malaise* (Saigon: Claude & Cie, 1899), p. 170.

cleansing. These prescriptions continue in the New Testament; after Jesus cured the leper, he instructed him to follow the laws of Moses (Mark 1:44).

Colonial Cambodia also had narratives positing a solution to leprosy. According to one newspaper reporter, the earliest story of a Khmer treatment for leprosy, *krabao*, could be found in the oldest Pali Khmer texts. The story, as published in the newspaper, goes like this:

> In a time well before the Buddha lived a king Ok Sa Ga Rit.... Princess Piyu, [the king's] oldest daughter ... developed leprosy, at which point her family promptly confined her in an isolated grotto ... to prevent contamination.
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> At the same time, King Rama, who reigned in a neighboring kingdom, was forced by an illness to abdicate his throne to his son. He sought refuge from the ostracism of this mysterious disease in the thickest forest, where he stumbled upon a *krabao* tree, in which he decided to live. Some time later, while walking through the forest, he heard the cries of Princess Piyu, who was being attacked by a tiger [in her grotto]. Because living in this miraculous tree had cured Rama of his disease, which was none other than leprosy, he had the vigor to come to Piyu's rescue. He rescued her and brought her to live in his *krabao* tree house, where they both ate of the fruits, the roots, and the leaves of this tree. From this, Piyu also returned to a state of perfect health, eventually bearing Rama thirty-two sons.
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> One day, Rama encountered a hunting party of his son's men in the forest and recounted his miraculous recovery. The son [on hearing of this news] sought out his father, intending to return the throne to him. However, Rama, who was happy in his forest solitude and with his recovered health, refused to reclaim the throne.[31]

It is unclear how much of this "ancient Cambodian legend" was the author's invention and to what extent a similar story existed in the Khmer countryside. It does closely parallel an Indian myth about the discovery of the chaulmoogra tree and an exiled Burmese prince.[32] It is possible that the original story was indeed about chaulmoogra and the French author substituted *krabao*. It is also just as possible that, if the story circulated among the Khmer population, storytellers had substituted a *krabao* tree for chaulmoogra, since chaulmoogra was lesser known in Cambodia.

The publication of this story reveals how this particular French writer was attempting to redefine the cultural context of leprosy for the readers of this newspaper—colonists and Khmer elite. The story presents seclusion of lepers, whether self-imposed (King Rama) or demanded by society (Princess Piyu), as having strong historical precedents in Khmer culture. It is also significant again that these two characters are both royalty. Leprosy afflicted the powerful, but it did not nullify their social power. Isolation ultimately led to a cure; rescinding the afflicted

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[31] "Une plante médicinale: le *Krabaov*-Thom," in *La Dépêche*, May 25, 1935.

[32] See Shanthakumar Thomas Oommen, "The History of Treatment of Leprosy and the Use of Hydnocarpus Oil," in *Past and Present of Leprosy: Archaeological, Historical, Paleopathological, and Clinical Approaches*, ed. Charlotte A. Roberts, Mary E. Lewis, and K. Manchester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 201–9. Ashley Thompson argues that the story of the Leper King is directly related to this story. Thompson, "The Suffering of Kings," p. 102.

royals' political control permitted their recovery of total health. Having reclaimed a state of healthfulness and fecundity by giving up his throne, the king wisely realized that he did not want to reclaim the rule of his kingdom. This is indeed a thinly veiled metaphor advocating the wisdom of colonial control over the indigenous body and political state.

In the early colonial period, researchers showed strong interest in potential Khmer remedies for leprosy. By far the most promising of indigenous treatments was *krabao*, an oil extract of a native tree.[33] Being a remedy specific to Cambodia, it held the potential to become recognized as a "French discovery" for a leprosy cure throughout the world. Thus, we have this story to generate commercial interest in *krabao* as well as to produce some claims to its historical legitimacy.[34] The narrative serves not only to legitimate medical research through historicity (while newspaper readers may doubt that the story is "real," they can believe that it is *really* Khmer);[35] it becomes a social tool wielded to produce a specific effect: continued experimentation with *krabao*.

In this newspaper account of the Rama tale, folk narrative legitimates scientific research concerning an indigenous remedy. In the following example, scientific narrative is used to authenticate the discovery by a Catholic organization of an indigenous remedy. While the appropriation of indigenous knowledge by Western science is common enough, this narrative attempts something more unusual. The author is a religious man—the director of the Catholic Foreign Missions seminary—appealing to the scientific community to validate a missionary "discovery" of an indigenous leprosy remedy, *hoàng-nàn*.[36] The material is presented in that era's typical scientific style. The first chapter details the botanical, chemical, and biological tests conducted on the bark and leaves of the *hoàng-nàn* plant.[37] The second chapter presents case studies, with medical observations and follow-up examinations. The author opens and closes his narrative by noting that "*le monde savant*" still refuses to recognize the value of a remedy recognized by "competent men of faith."[38] Sprinkled throughout the scientific exposition are case studies that also serve as parables of missionary men successfully using *hoàng-nàn* to heal their leprous converts. The discursive style is scientific, the emplotment religious. While this text is most transparent in revealing the tense dynamic between the religious and secular factions in the colony, it also tells other stories. Most overt is the medical case study where

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[33] The Cambodian *krabao* tree is known by the scientific name *Hydnocarpus anthelminthicus*. It is of the same genus as the chaulmoogra tree. Even with the development of new chemical treatments, the scientific and commercial interest in *krabao* remained strong through the 1930s. It was used extensively at the Cambodian Leprosarium Troeung. Troeung was created from an existing leper village by French colonial decree in 1915, and was the site of the only official Cambodian leprosarium during the colonial period.

[34] This story may have had some local roots, but it was clearly not as widespread as the story of the Leper King. Different colonial observers independently recorded the story of the leper king at least a dozen times. See footnote 8. To my knowledge, not one ethnographical account of the telling of the story of King Rama in the Cambodian countryside exists.

[35] Even if we may doubt that claim.

[36] E. C. Lesserteur, *Le Hoàng-Nàn, Rèmede Tonkinois contre la rage, la lèpre, et autre maladies* (Paris: Librarie J.-B. Balliere et Fils, 1896).

[37] *Hoàng-nàn* is likely either the Vietnamese name for the chaulmoogra tree or a closely related species.

[38] Lesserteur, *Le Hoàng-Nàn*, p. 15.

the disease (leprosy) again trumps the patient (leper) as active agent. Obvious as well is a reenactment of Bible stories; here are men of God healing the penitent leper. Taken as a whole, the narrative attempts an amazing transformation of *hoàng-nàn*. A traditional Vietnamese herbal medicine becomes a commercially valuable and scientifically validated drug thanks to its rediscovery by Catholics.

Just as religious men employed scientific discourse to legitimate their missionary activities, scientific writing also borrowed heavily from religious referents. In an 1899 study, a French doctor analyzed the "favorable" conditions for the development of leprosy in Indochina. Like many other researchers of the time, he hypothesized on the possible role of filth, poverty, bad dietary habits, and the immorality of native populations. In his speculations, the researcher openly mixed religious and scientific narratives: "It is not until today that these predisposing causes [of leprosy] have been noticed and combated. When Moses forbade the Hebrews from eating certain foods like pork, ... etc., he had for the primary aim to defend against the spread of the leprosy that ravaged among them."[39] This dubious claim serves to reinforce again the idea that active management in Indochina at the turn of the twentieth century echoes the correct, ancient, Judeo–Christian manner of controlling the disease.

The medical doctor examined Cambodian bodies and, from those examinations, produced a vision of both correct social order and his authority to produce such a vision. The journalist supported the business community's research on *krabao* through the story of King Rama. Cambodian values expressed in this "ancient" story were not so inimical to current, potentially lucrative pharmaceutical research. The priest represented indigenous knowledge through scientific exposition to lay claim to the value of the secular works of the religious communities in Indochina. Each professional group mixed narrative styles to persuade others both within and beyond their communities: a scientist referenced religious texts to buttress the validity of his scientific findings, a journalist published a folktale to establish a historical basis for current scientific research, and a priest used scientific discourse to demonstrate the scientific value of religious work. Each story is about leprosy, yet the disease itself in many ways is a secondary focus of these narratives. By telling their stories, these authors appropriate Cambodian and Vietnamese bodies, knowledge, and values to legitimate specific professional agendas. But the stories as well are actively constructing shared realities. They reinforce particular notions of communities; they create boundaries. The individuality of each author's voice supposedly distinguishes these stories from oral tales. But how singular are the origins of these narratives?

THE ORAL NARRATIVE AND THE BIOMEDICAL NARRATIVE

Oral narratives are generally co-created. The community creates and duplicates the story. James Siegel has observed that the early copyists of modern texts in the Indies transcribed not their witnessing of events but what the community knew of the event. He writes, "The origin of the story is in the speech of the community." Such a way of producing (reproducing) a story, he argues, is one step toward modern prose, authentic authorship.[40] While Siegel locates this transitional phase

[39] Cognacq and Mougeout, *De la lèpre en Cochinchine*, p. 134.

[40] James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 25–26.

among Indonesians adopting "modern" literary styles, this step-wise analysis can be extended to Western doctors and to the medical case studies presented here, that is, early clinical case studies are a transitional phase in the social production of a medical fact. These leprosy doctors essentially present (what we know to be) apocryphal stories as genuine facts, validated by their specialized authority. Yet, their authorship is not individual. The researcher creates this story from the expectations of his audience, his publisher and his editor, from the stories of his fellow researchers, and from his internalized understandings of the leper. As with oral tales, the origin of this story is rooted in the speech and the expectations of the community and *not* in the witnessing of the event. The *authority* garnered for the writer is directly proportional to group participation in creating the story. (This is obviously true today for many types of professional authorship.) The creation of the leper's story at this historical moment is thus not so different between a "scientific" and an "oral" community.

The shared authorship also creates a community of meaning. In other words, both the telling and the "reading" (or hearing) depends on shared values. These communities of meaning can be revealed most clearly in the "readings" of an icon of the leper. The Leper King is not only a mythologized historical figure that captures the imagination of the Khmer villager; it was (and is) also a material icon. In the early twentieth century, a sandstone statue of the Leper King stood prominently in the ancient ruins of Angkor. It seems that when this statue was carved, in the late twelfth century, it was originally ascribed as Yama, God of Justice and Death. How in the intervening centuries it became associated with the Leper King is debatable.[41] Art historians note that while unconventional in being nude and having fangs, this statue is not technically sophisticated or otherwise unusual. While it was in many ways unremarkable as a work of art, it was nonetheless an important pilgrimage site for Khmers.[42] It was highly venerated both as a protector spirit and, as importantly, as a representation of Khmer kingship. Today, there are no less than two original leper king images, ritually placed in significant locations, and three copies[43] worshipped throughout the country. Two of these duplicates are sponsored by royalty. Clearly, the icon is still associated with a strong spirit cult.[44] The image of the leper king had and continues to have a strong cultural resonance within Khmer society. Interestingly, this image also held a strong, but *different*, resonance for European observers.

In a 1927 colonial novel entitled, appropriately enough, *Le roi lépreux* (The Leper King), the protagonist of the novel, approaching the end of a tour of the Angkorean complex, has a strong emotional reaction on encountering the stone figure of the Leper King. He describes the statue: "It was of a beautiful violet sandstone, and represented a completely nude young man, of a height slightly below average, sitting in the oriental style ... The face, remarkably pure, had a sad nobility, almost

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[41] Ashley Thompson makes the provocative argument that this shift was due, in part, to phonetic distortion of the statue's original name. Thompson, "The Suffering of Kings," p. 107.

[42] Today, the original sits prominently in the center courtyard of the National Museum of Cambodia. A copy sits on the Terrace of the Leper King in the Angkorean complex.

[43] Also identified as the female deity Yiey Tep (also transliterated Yay Deb).

[44] Sophea Chan Hang, "Stec Gamlan and Yay Deb: Worshiping Kings and Queens in Cambodia Today," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John A. Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 113–26.

despairing."[45] The protagonist becomes mesmerized by the image's "marvelous expression of hopelessness, of distress."[46] The novel illuminates a particular mindset, for the facial expression of the Leper King, which is not artistically appreciably different from other Angkorean sculptures of the period, does not overtly convey "hopelessness," "distress," or "sad nobility."

The despair read in the Leper King's expression is a projection, a French construct imposed on a Khmer image. Contemporaneous with the novel's publication, the French colonial administration was similarly reconfiguring the living lepers in the country. In other words, they, too, were being redefined despite the existing representations within Khmer culture. This was not solely a French colonial phenomenon. On visiting the Angkorean complex, an English writer would see similar pathos in the figure.[47] Echoing the French author, he would write with pity, "I saw the statue of the old boy sitting disconsolately and alone ... his only companions the monkeys and birds by day and the prowling panther at night."[48]

Both Khmer and Europeans see something remarkable in a figure that, artistically, is mundane. Khmers ascribe to the Leper King a vibrant agency; he is a center to which others are drawn. As such, they attend to him closely, dress him in saffron robes, and make offerings and pray to him. Europeans, in contrast, find him exceptional for the reverse reason. He is an outsider, a source of pity—alone and powerless. He is devoid of agency. As a "leper king," both prominent and leprous, he is an amalgamation of several constructs. For Khmers, he is a king unusual among kings for being leprous; and for Europeans, he is a leper who is extraordinary for being a king. The iconography of the material object reproduces the narrative of the leper within distinct Khmer and French traditions.

In many ways, the worlds within these stories are quite distinct and incommensurable. The Khmer narrative terminates once the protagonist develops leprosy. The emplotment of the story of the Leper King stresses the actions leading to leprosy. The story is about the *person* who becomes leprous. Once the disease has befallen the protagonist, the story ends. It is ever-present and incurable. In contrast, the narratives surrounding the leper in Western traditions focus on what happens after someone contracts the disease, that is, on its containment—by repentance in the Biblical model, and active amelioration in Western medical models. While lepers do appear in Theravada Buddhist texts, they are not complete outcasts.[49] One researcher quoted a monk as saying of a leper living in his wat, "I can't conceive that this man is a danger ... if he is a leper, it's because he has, in a past life, merited being reborn in a leprous state. If I myself ... become leprous one day, it is not man that will be the cause, but myself by my past acts."[50] The monk's focus is not on what has passed, but rather on controlling what will become. Colonial observers described this attitude as, oddly, "an unfortunate Buddhist fatalism." In contrast, in the Bible, leprosy is an

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[45] Pierre Benoit, *Le roi lépreux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1927), p. 117.

[46] Ibid., p. 118.

[47] Perry Burgess, *Who Walk Alone* (New York, NY: Holt and Co., 1940).

[48] Perry Burgess, "Lepers and Leprosy," *Scientific Monthly* 42 (May 1936): 399.

[49] My thanks to Elizabeth Wilson and Justin McDaniel for the information they provided to me on lepers in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. See also Phou Ngeun Souk-Aloun, *La médecine bouddhique traditionnelle en pays théravâda* (Limoges: Editions Roger Jollois, 1995).

[50] B. Menaut and H. Baisez, *La lèpre au Cambodge* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1919), p. 133.

exceptional disease mentioned in several instances and singled out with specific prescriptions, most significant of which is total exclusion from society.[51] Colonial regulations mirror this concept of the leper. The French colonial government issued dozens of decrees in Indochina excluding, regulating, imprisoning, and otherwise limiting the freedom of lepers. This was at a time when there were no effective treatments for the disease and little proof that it was contagious. But in the end, the story justified the material measures enacted.

Conclusion

The two realities that can be touched (the stone leper and the living leper) are both representational and material. The stories surrounding them have an internal, contained logic based on their own moral and social world. Further, the disease (leprosy) and the individual (leper) were often distinguishable, if not distinct, actors within these narratives. In some instances, the stories transverse narrative categories, as in the study of *hoàng-nàn*. Further, the worlds within these stories are not mutually exclusive for their audiences. The Khmer man trained as a Western doctor may give credence to both the story of the Leper King and the story of the unfortunate Scotsman. The Cambodian villager may have believed in the tale of the Leper King and King Rama of the *krabao* tree, while worshiping the stone statue as both or neither. The anticlerical French doctor may have internalized the Biblical leper, and thus viewed the Khmer leper as the equivalent of a Judeo–Christian leper. Even as he used scientific discourse to remove this sacred contagion, the medical narratives he produced recreate a secular contagion that echoes religious stigma.

While perhaps a *krabao* tree can replace a chaulmoogra tree when an Indian story is replanted on Khmer soil, the plasticity of the narrative still has it limits. And, while I have perhaps stressed the contrast between French and Khmer concepts of the leper, it would be exaggeration to claim they were entirely distinct. Clearly, the leper is marked in both contexts, but that mark is read in many ways. The leper, with all of that term's slippery connotations, and not the Hansen's disease patient, is key to both the story of the Leper King and the parable of Jesus and the lepers. The tale of the Leper King would never make sense as the tale of the "King with Hansen's Disease." In the same vein, Jesus would be a doctor rather than a miracle worker if he had healed those with Hansen's disease.

Finally, each narrative is an effort to make sense of a particular social world. These social worlds must be internally coherent and bounded. The story both produces and reproduces the known world for its audience, but even in stories the known world has its well-plotted mysteries. Further, stories are inherently about change; meaning is found in the transformation of the protagonist's situation. But the stories themselves change as well, because their creators and audiences are not static. The proliferation of stories of the leper in the late nineteenth century, each story co-created and in flux, presents a dizzying multiplicity of "the leper" in colonial Cambodia. In doing so, these stories also present a multiplicity of models for understanding, existing, and acting in the world.

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[51] Another parable is the Bible story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. See Luke 17:11–19.

BETWEEN A SONG AND A *PREI*: TRACKING CAMBODIAN HISTORY AND COSMOLOGY THROUGH THE FOREST

Penny Edwards*

David Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" was one of the earliest pieces I read on Cambodia, and the first to divert my attention from modern politics to history.[1] "Songs" captivated me with its synergy of fairytale, psychology, and literary analysis, and with the lyrical quality of its writing. Above all, it showed me that history need never be dull. Chandler's writing on Khmer Rouge historiography, and his observations on the role of the French in carving out a central place for Angkor in the Cambodian nationalist imagination, are other key aspects of his work that shaped my interest in the colonial era and its place in Cambodian historical consciousness.

This article draws on "Songs" and another seminal essay by Chandler entitled "Maps for the Ancestors"[2] to reflect on the place of "place" in Khmer textual, ideological, ritual, and aesthetic narratives from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Building upon Chandler's nuanced reading of several Khmer texts and other recent French and Cambodian scholarship, I examine tensions resulting from the different values that Europeans and Khmers place on space and landscapes. I

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[1] David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), pp. 53–77.

[2] David P. Chandler, "Maps for the Ancestors," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994*, ed. David P. Chandler (St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 25–42.

consider how depictions of generic sites (notably *prei*, or forest) refract cultural notions about boundaries, domesticity, and transformation. I examine how specific sites and features of the natural landscape became worked into Khmer and European narratives of colony and nation, and briefly explore the legacies of such colonial landscaping for Cambodia after independence. In so doing, I interrogate the narrative function and cultural genealogy of notions of boundaries in twentieth-century Cambodia.

The boundary stones, or *seyma*, used to delimit the sacred grounds of Khmer pagodas, as well as the angular, containing walls around Angkorean monasteries and temples, all indicate longstanding indigenous practices of marking off the divine from the mundane and the sacred from the secular. Yet colonial maps, monuments, and parks largely ignore such indigenous conceptual foundations, instead drawing upon a new series of demarcations—urban versus rural, backward versus progressive—which helped to anticipate, in Thongchai Winichakul's sense of the word, the entrenchment of new nation-state boundaries.[3] A dominant motif was the distinction between urban and rural areas. The Khmer nationalist elite that arose in the 1930s saw the emergence of new indigenous forums modeled on European approaches to the land as a foundry of national character.

Where Chandler's literary analysis in "Songs" of two Khmer folktales and one verse manuscript focused on Khmer conceptions of moral and social order, here I focus on one tale, "*Reuang Damnoek Kaun Lok*" (the story of the origin of the child-of-the-world bird), to explore indigenous notions of space. Echoing Chandler, I suggest that the forest has its own cosmology, as a place of transformation and transit, between Buddhist and animist worlds and between the normal and the abnormal, and that this cosmology and the larger worldview in which it was set entertained different notions of boundaries to those formalized in the colonial period.

TRANSCOLONIAL TALES: FORESTS AND FOKLORE IN EUROPE AND CAMBODIA

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century incursions by Siam and Vietnam wreaked incalculable loss and damage to human life and material culture throughout that mass of land and among people commonly identified, through such characteristics as language, familial ties, and social and aesthetic practice, as Khmer. However, this violent flux did not destabilize indigenous cosmology. Normative poems and oral history accommodated and interpreted conflict and trauma. During these periods of territorial fragmentation, a common moral vocabulary and a cosmology fusing Buddhist, animist, and Brahmin beliefs and idioms ensured the partial reclamation of indigenous narratives from cultural subjugation.[4] In many senses, the same held true during Cambodia's French Protectorate ("French Protectorate of Cambodge," 1863–1954). Oral history, legend, normative poems, and song were often dismissed as non-history, folkore, or "fairytale," or categorized under the broader rubric of "mores and customs" by colonial scholar-officials, many of whom were intent on charting a linear history for Cambodia. Yet alternative readings of the past persisted in the daily

[3] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

[4] For an example of how the Siamese invasion entered oral lore, see Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les* neak ta (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 242–247, 252.

lives of most Cambodians, as reflected in the series of Khmer folktales collected and published by the Buddhist Institute in the 1950s and 1960s.

The construction of competing linear narratives in colonized South and Southeast Asia formed part of a larger, systemic expansion of colonial control over space.[5] In Cambodia, the organization of space was crucial to colonial projects to bring Cambodia "out" of the "degeneracy" associated with its post-Angkorean past, and "into" the present and future-perfect of the French Protectorate. During the initial stages of colonialism, political, economic, and military imperatives were critical factors in identifying, delineating, and securing boundaries, resources, and colonial settlements, and establishing telecommunications networks and routes. Strategic concerns also informed the selection, planning, and laying of centers of colonial control—notably the capital of Phnom Penh, where commanding authority for the protectorate was vested in a Résident Supérieur du Cambodge (RSC), and in the Résidences around the country, each headed by a French Résident answerable to the RSC. Even in these stages of a strictly utilitarian approach to space and its organization, cultural comparisons with "home" by administrators, explorers, and others revealed key conceptual distinctions between European and Khmer perceptions of the indigenous landscape. From the 1890s onward, a range of physical objects—including maps, parks, exhibits, and statuary—transcribed these predominantly Eurocentric perceptions into the material environment. On the establishment of the French Protectorate, the twelfth-century temples of Angkor were partially engulfed by vegetation. This chaotic blurring of ancient monument and jungle mayhem was the antithesis of *la douce France* (sweet France), whose poetic tradition described an orderly harmony of rivers, cultivated fields, orchards, vineyards, and woods.[6] The disjuncture between European woodland and Angkorean wilderness left at least one French visitor cold. Writing in 1865, the young explorer Louis de Carné judged Angkor in its jungle setting as "lacking in emotion," and declared "The remains of a ruined monastery in the heart of a German forest ... move more deeply."[7]

Two centuries earlier, France had sought to bring order to its "monstrous jumble" of ill-tended forests through a Cartesian regime of classical forestry that ranked trees by type and use, and aimed to clean woodlands of scraggly undergrowth, bandits, and vagrants.[8] In late-nineteenth-century Europe, the forest morphed into various myths of nation, ranging from Germany's primeval forest (a site of tribal assertion against the Roman empire of stone and law), to England's Greenwood (a preserve of royalty and sanctuary for justice-seekers), to the romanticism of France's Fontainebleau.[9] But the trope of the rural idyll was not a

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[5] Bernard Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12,2 (1981): 227–52, 228.

[6] See Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 15, 17, 163–65; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 153–273; and George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1975), p. 41.

[7] Louis de Carné, "Impressions d'Asie," *Anthologie Franco-Indochinoise Tome I* (Hanoi: Imprimerie Mac-Dinh-Tu, 1928), p. 31.

[8] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pp. 177–78.

[9] Ibid., pp. 163–65; Knight, *Robin Hood*, pp. 153–273; and Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, p. 41.

constant in European nineteenth-century life, literature, or thought. In the 1812 edition of their collected fairytales, the brothers Jacob and Willhelm Grimm, who popularized "Hansel and Gretel," a story in which a father and stepmother twice abandon their children in a forest during a time of famine, described hungry parents deserting their children as familiar territory for most readers.[10] The Grimms were writing in circumstances of widespread poverty visited on the German principalities by war, crop failures, and foreign occupation (which would be avenged by Prussia's dismemberment of France in 1870 to 1871).[11] Against this climate, the forest in European fairytales was often depicted as a place of danger and temptation, inhabited by wolves and witches, where immoral actions such as the abandonment or attempted murder of children ("Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White") or a child's acts of disobedience, straying from the path, or dalliance with strangers ("Little Red Riding Hood," "Goldilocks") invite death and disaster. Building on the legacy of Dante, who found himself "in the middle of the journey of our life" in a dark wood "where the straight way was lost," the forest and feelings of loss and impenetrability in such tales symbolized the uncertainty and journey between the organization of a home life and parental framework that the child protagonist has left, and the path through puberty to adulthood, on which they encounter the incarnations of their deepest wishes and anxieties.[12]

Even the most seemingly straightforward of these "classic" stories, however, was riddled with moral ambiguities. Violence remained a staple, and its standard twin was deceit: a wolf poises as a grandmother to devour a little girl ("Red Riding Hood"); a stepmother decapitates her son but then sits his head back on his body to hide her crime ("The Juniper Tree"); and a stepsister mutilates her own foot until the blood flows, trying to squeeze herself into the slipper and trick the prince ("Cinderella").[13] Similarly, as Judith Jacobs notes, Cambodian folktales are larded with "instances of mistreatment of relatives. Children are taken to the forest and abandoned when there is not enough to eat ... wives trick their husbands and try to kill them; a grandmother is eaten by her grandson for allowing the meal to shrink in cooking," protagonists commonly resort to ruses and deception, and "Books of Lies" appear every so often.[14] In European as in Cambodian folklore and fairytale, deceit and disguise are close cousins.

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[10] Jakob and Willhelm Grimm, "Preface to the First Edition of Kinder Und Hausmärchen," in Jack Zipes, "Dreams of a Better Bourgeois Life: The Psychological Origins of the Grimms' Tales," in *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, ed. James M. McGlathery (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), p. 206.

[11] M. Poole, "Illicit Imaginings: An Australian History of Vietnamese Stories Retold" (doctoral dissertation, Australian National University, 2002).

[12] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 94.

[13] Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 54–55. There's an interesting debate whether Cinderella's glass slippers were actually made of fur (*pantoufle de vair*), which, if true, fits nicely with the forest themes discussed here. See, for instance, http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002886

[14] J. Jacobs, *Traditional Literature of Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 18.

NATIONAL TOPOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY

European images of the forest as an evil and inhumane place persisted in children's nurseries into the late nineteenth century. In the public sphere, however, these sinister portrayals of nature gradually gave way to nationalist narratives that romanticized woodlands as the cradle of human "earthly" sentiments and a crucible of "national" character.[15] In what Antony Smith describes as "the territorialization of memory" and the "historicisation of nature," the nation became naturalized in various "poetic landscapes" that invoked natural features of the land as specific elements of national history.[16] Homi Bhabha has described landscape as a "recurrent metaphor" for the "inscape of national identity."[17] In their public invocations, the benign symbols mobilized to forge a "national" landscape are often particularly twisted metaphors, statements of sweetness and order designed to conceal or negate sites and histories of violence and disorder. In many areas of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Europe, the forests remained frightening, chaotic places that offered paths of flight from war. The tropes of gentle forest sites and sentimental ruins conjured by de Carné and others in "overseas France" allowed the negation of these violent European spaces through the visualization and assertion of notions of European superiority and order over what was deemed, in colonized domains, to be chaos, violence, and decay.

To many French explorers and colonialists, Cambodia's *prei* appeared not as rich sites of history and memory, saturated with lore and spirits, but as the quintessence of the colony as *tabula rasa*—an uncultivated wilderness. A dominant view held by colonial scholar-officials was that the latent kernels of "civilization" lay deep within the Khmers, and required careful extraction, cultivation, colonial management, and education. This view was replicated in the colonial conceptualization of the *prei*, in whose tangled depths the seeds of civilized time lay buried, manifest in ancient temple ruins. These human relics of a "lost" civilization were to be carved out from the forest, cleared, and turned into parks or relocated in miniature to museums in urban settings. *Prei* were also valued as store-houses of natural specimens, as reflected in the illustrations and notations by the naturalist Henri Mouhot, whose journey to Angkor in 1860 triggered French interest in the temples. As subsequent expeditions hacked their way through the Cambodian jungle, the French state was busily incorporating such once royal parks as Fontainebleau into a new national *patrimoine* (heritage) for public enjoyment, fostering a new vogue in romantic woodland hikes. Celebrated in the rural, idyllic landscapes of the impressionists August Renoir, Claude Monet, and others, the visual rhetoric of *la douce France* worked as a cultural counterfoil to the Khmer landscape, encouraging the latter's invocation as a sign of national heritage and character doomed to degeneration and decay. This trope, which implicitly cast Europeans as fairytale figures whose heroic pursuits would rescue *le Cambodge* from the clutches of history and wicked predators, continued well into the 1920s, when France's future minister of culture André Malraux depicted the forests around Angkor as stifling terrain, sites of

[15] See Knight, *Robin Hood*, pp. 153–273; and Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, p. 41.

[16] Antony Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 135–37.

[17] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 143.

"disintegration," where "every thought grew turbid, decomposed."[18] Malraux's reading correlated with other colonial literary treatments of Cambodian forestland as an anterior realm, a site of magic and hermits, bypassed by modernity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, trees from Cambodia were shipped to international exhibitions and felled to float statues down river from the Angkorean temples to modernity's new curiosity cabinets, namely a small but growing number of museums in Phnom Penh, Saigon, and Paris. Animals were ensnared in zoological gardens or transported to Europe's natural history museums as exotic specimens. Meanwhile, in the colonies and protectorates of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, indigenous forests were both exploited for economic gain and naturalized as an extension of the European landscape—an arboreal endorsement of France's *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission)—and converted from chaos into echoes of Fontainebleau.

In 1906, these missions and metaphors blended in the Bois de Bologne when Cambodian court dancers, described by French critics as living relics of the lost age of Angkor, performed in Paris before the president of the republic and King Sisowath as part of a program of festivities surrounding that year's Exposition Coloniale, at Marseille. Several features of this "national" performance, as depicted in the leading Parisian journal *l'Illustration*, were alien to Khmer tradition. A truncated segment of court dance was sandwiched between two other European renditions, on a stage—raised, rectangular, separated from the audience, and at a height that elevated the performers above the heads of both king and president—set in carefully landscaped woods. At Marseille, as in past and future colonial exhibitions in the Metropole, dedicated displays highlighted the economic benefits of colonized forests.[19]

BADLANDS AND BIRDLANDS: TRACKING KHMER COSMOLOGY THROUGH THE FOREST

In mid-nineteenth-century Cambodia, however, as Chandler's "Songs" demonstrates with characteristic depth and elegance, the forest—*prei*—acted as a symbol of all that was wild, lawless, and beyond the boundaries of human control. As the first Khmer-French dictionary tells us, in 1878, "*srok*, par opposition a *prei*, designe les animaux domestiques ou habitant dans le voisinage de l'homme" (*srok*, by contrast to *prei*, designates domesticated animals and those living near humans), while *prei* denotes "wild" animals or plants.[20] Close to a century later, these distinctions still held: Solange Thierry, the French connoisseur of Cambodian folklore, noted in 1969 the connection between "*srok*" and domesticity, "*prei*" and savagery.[21] Existing on a parallel realm with the civilized, orderly life in human settlements (*srok*), the badlands of the *prei*—haunted with demons (*yeak*) and infested

[18] André Malraux, *The Royal Way* (New York, NY: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1935), p. 71.

[19] For a more detailed treatment of the theatricality of race in British Burm, see Penny Edwards, "Half-Cast: Staging Race in British Burma," *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5,3 (2002): 279–95.

[20] Étienne Aymonier, *Dictionnaire Khmer-Français* (Saigon, 1878), p. 423. This dictionary was compiled by Son Diep (1855–1934) and Étienne Aymonier (1844–1929).

[21] E. Porée-Maspéro, *La vie du paysan khmer* (Phnom Penh: Commission des Moeurs et Coutumes du Cambodge, 1969); cited in Solange Thierry, "Étude d'un corpus de contes cambodgiens traditionnels" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Paris V, 1976), pp. 41–42.

with wild animals—gave a tangible dimension to Khmer concepts of disorder and acted as a psychic reservoir for all that was inexplicable and inhumane in the daily life of a country contorted by protracted and repeated violence and foreign occupations. This neat dichotomy between the wild and the civilized is a useful analytic device. It is also, as Chandler hints, deceptively simple. The forest as depicted in both "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle is a highly ambiguous terrain, that speaks not so much to a bipolar moral geography (*srok* versus *prei*, or civilized versus wild) as to a complex dialectical terrain, where notions of civilized or wild contract, expand, and shape-shift in relation or reaction to violations of moral or societal norms.

"*Kaun Lok*" tells of three girls abandoned in the wood who survive their mother's murderous impulse through their transformation into birds. At the end of the story, the mother returns to reclaim her children and, while chasing them through the forest, she dies of exhaustion. In her elegant analysis of this tale, Thierry compares the abandonment of the three children to their being put to death: "a new life will arise from this sacrifice, and separate two worlds: that of the humans of the world, *loka*, and that of the forest protected by *devata*" (celestial beings who communicate between heaven and earth).[22] Similarly, the transformation of boys into birds in the Grimms' fairytale "The Seven Ravens"—in which seven brothers disappear and become ravens as their sister is born—has been read as a metaphor for death, namely, the demise of paganism and the rise of Christianity.[23] Elsewhere, in Grimms' "The Fitcher's Bird," in a veiled allusion to the practice of tarring-and-feathering suspected criminals, the eldest of three daughters glues feathers all over her body, disguising herself as a bird, and successfully escapes her captor, a wizard.[24] Here, as in Cambodian tales, the bird and its form symbolize flight and escape from captivity. Like this figure, and the eleventh brother in the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale "The Twelve Swans," who ends up with one feathered arm, the girls in "*Kaun Lok*" do not achieve complete transformation. Deeds, like spells, the stories tell us, cannot be completely reversed anymore than one's fate can be wholly escaped. Bird-women, Thierry notes, exist in Khmer mythology as *kinnari*, and also in Thai and Lao legend.[25] The Khmer word *sat* denotes either an animal or bird. The compound *sat lok* refers to sentient beings, while birds who enter a house are still referred to as *sat daun ta*, ancestral-birds, or birds carrying messages from ancestors.[26] These compounds and beliefs may themselves have ancestral origins in Indian literature, where ancestors sometimes take the form of birds, and where today, in some traditions, on the eleventh day after death, food is offered in ceremony to crows who are believed to be ancestors of the deceased.[27]

When Son Diep, who helped to compile the 1878 dictionary cited earlier, traveled to Paris in 1900, he likened the white-faced women, and especially Parisian actresses,

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[22] Solange Thierry, *Le Cambodge des contes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp. 140–43.

[23] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 12–13.

[24] "Fitcher's Bird" as summarized by Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 299–300.

[25] Thierry, *Le Cambodge des contes*, pp. 140–43.

[26] Personal communication, Siyonn Sophearith, Phnom Penh, May 2006.

[27] Personal communication, Debjani Ganguly, August 2006.

to feathered angels.[28] A feathered fate also meets the female protagonist in the popular Khmer folktale of the meat that shrunk. The tale describes the genesis of a bird by tracing its cry, "*svet te chav!*" ("grandchildren, I didn't shrink [the meat]!"), to the rejoinder of a woman who turned into a bird when she was killed by her son for stealing his meat, which in truth had simply reduced in size during cooking.

The ambivalent role of birds in Cambodian farming life, as destroyers of crops and spirited creatures, figures in "*Kaun Lok,*" where the girls who are sent to guard paddy from scavenging birds are later turned into birds by gods in order to protect them from their mother. The role of birds as agents or modes of transformation is a theme common to the mythology, folklore, and literature of many countries. In European fairytales, however, transformation into animals typically represents the loss of all humanity, and is generally followed by a spell that restores humanity, together with the human form ("Beauty and the Beast," "The Twelve Swans").[29] By contrast, the Buddhist-animist interface in Cambodian belief systems is evidenced in the way transformation into birds or animals signifies not imprisonment in an animal form but release. The daughters in "*Kaun Lok,*" when flying through the forest, escape their human frame and the prison of their existence as daughters of an abusive mother, but retain their humanity; their mother, who retains her human body, does not.

The story (outlined below) contrasts the fate of three girls abandoned in the forest, who survive through the intervention of gods and spirits, with that of their impoverished peasant mother, a young widow who, despite the safety of the *srok* and with material possessions lavished on her by her new husband, a thief, grows greedy. Her good animal instincts, the maternal ties bonding her to her children, are weakened, and she succumbs to the baser weaknesses of human society. Sexual and material desires lead her to take a playboy for a husband, and as her jealousy and covetousness grow, she violates not only social laws but also the behavioral codes for women enshrined in the "*Chbap Srey*" (a normative poem handed down through generations that prescribed correct conduct for women).

The story begins with the mother just widowed. She has three daughters, and the oldest can cook and fetch water by herself—an indication that she is perhaps nearing puberty and may herself represent a source of sexual rivalry to her mother, and also that she is a virtuous, helpful daughter. The middle child is old enough to take care of the youngest, who knows only how to run around. The girls help their mother chop wood and forage for vegetables to sell at the market. A vagabond courts the mother; they marry, and he moves in with her. He comes and goes, robbing people in the district, and the wife/mother takes to wearing fancy clothes and gold and silver, and grows bold. The mother and stepfather eat well, but the daughters are given only scraps, and sleep on the verandah or near the kitchen shed, where they are savaged by mosquitoes. The mother dresses up and follows her husband to market, to keep an eye on him, but he is embarrassed by this behavior and tells her to stay at home and take care of her children. Worried that he'll soon leave her for one of the many hussies (*srey kouch*) at the market, she decides to abandon her children instead, so that he'll have no reason to tell her to stay at home. She takes

[28] Khing Hoc Dy, "Le voyage de l'envoyé cambodgien Son Diep à Paris en 1900," in *Récits de voyages asiatiques: Genres, mentalités, conception de l'espace,* ed. Claudine Salmon (Paris: EFEO, 1996), pp. 367–83, 378.

[29] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment,* p. 95.

them to a secluded spot in the forest, at the foot of a mountain. Here she scatters rice seeds in a pond and warns them to stay put and guard the seedlings, and that if they return home, she'll beat them to death. She provides them with three plates of uncooked rice, forty corn kernels, a clay pot, a pinch of salt, and a smidgen of *prâhok* (fermented fish paste), thinking that either tigers will devour the girls or they will die of hunger. Telling her daughters to sleep in the *ktom* (a raised, thatched shelter) and that she will be back for them soon, she heads home. When their stepfather remarks on their absence, she embellishes the truth, telling him she has left them to watch the paddy ripen, in the company of *neak chas tum* (elderly people who symbolize the stability, continuity, and order of the *srok*).

After the mother leaves the girls, they scatter the corn kernels in the pond—an initial, instinctive attempt to cultivate the wilderness around them. When night falls, the girls climb up into the hut (*ktom*) to sleep, but the roaring, howling, and screeching of elephants, wild dogs, wolves, and monkeys fill the forest, frightening even the eldest girl. An *arak devata* (guardian spirit) in the forest wonders how a mother could take her "wee little children" and abandon them to the appetites of ferocious beasts, and decides to save the girls. He frightens off the wild animals, and the next morning goes to heaven to seek an audience with King Indra, and learns that the girls will be changed into birds soon enough. In the meantime, he must protect the girls from savage beasts and keep the pond supplied with *kreum* fish, rabbit fish, and water snails.

The girls guard the paddy for three days and three nights, but they finish the rice their mother left them, and the youngest cries for food. The oldest forages for vine leaves in the forest and watercress shoots in the pond, and finds wild sugarcane; these she shares with her sisters. When the youngest still cries, the oldest takes them to catch fish, which they bring to roast; but the fire has burnt out, and so she gets her sisters to eat a little of it raw (just as birds eat raw food). Finally, giving in to her sisters' wailing, the eldest daughter leads them home. There the mother threatens and scolds the girls; she rushes at them, clubs them, drags them back into the forest, and abandons them there to die. "How pitiful these girls are," the narrator tells us: "Their mother has beaten them until their blood ran, but still they call her '*me*' [mom], oblivious to her murderous intent." The youngest daughter's babbling now contrasts with the realization, by the eldest, that their path to survival lies in their embrace of abandonment. At this pivotal moment in the story, the eldest rejects her mother and the *srok*, and leads her sisters back into the forest (*prei*) to escape the violence of the home. She drags them into the *ktom*, but their mother has clubbed them so vigorously that all three girls pass out. Seeing this, the *arak devata* sprinkles water on the girls so that they regain consciousness (*smar dae*, from Sanskrit *smriti*, memory, remembrance, consciousness). The oldest assumes the role of nurturer, fetching rabbit fish, snails, and shellfish to share with her sisters, to whom she explains that death is imminent as their mother wants them dead.

While their mother, we can assume, is still enjoying the fruits of her husband's thievery, and dressing in finery, the girls are now threadbare. "We have only one *sampot* and one shirt each, they're already torn to shreds," the oldest sister explains, "and when the cold season comes ... we will be naked, with only our bodies, like wild animals..." Gradually, their mouths stiffen into beaks and can no longer form words. But this is an external transformation: the girls communicate in birdsong, but retain human sensibilities and powers of aural comprehension. While their clothing shifts from woven cloth to down and feathers, the border zone that they inhabit, with

the help of the *devata*, is transformed from wild scrub haunted by beasts of prey into the grazing grounds of gentler animals. The corn kernels scattered in the pond have turned to maize, and the *devata*'s role shifts from fending off wild beasts to protecting the girls' nascent crops from deer, pigs, monkeys, and squirrels.

When a neighbor turns the girls' stepfather into the police, and he is given a life sentence at court, the mother begins to feel sorry for her daughters, and decides to go and find them. But she is too late. The girls have begun to grow feathers, and when they see their mother, they fly into the treetops, leading her deeper into the forest in a dance of death.

To inhabit the world of the *prei*, the story tells us, it is necessary to be less, or more, than human. In "real life," those humans who thrived outside the civilized realm of Cambodia's *srok* to survive in the *prei* were at the far peripheries of human endeavour and morality: they were bandits or hermits.[30] The *kaun lok* bird, which nests at the forest's perimeter, symbolizes the meeting place of wild and civilized, and highlights how easily one can collapse into the other.

Writing of such "wild" figures as ogres and wolves in folk- and fairytales, the social philosopher Michel de Certeau has stressed their narrative function as boundary markers that at once represent an alterity and draw attention to the narrative's topography. "The river, wall, or tree makes a frontier" writes de Certeau. "It does not have the character of nowhere that cartographical representation usually presupposes." Rather, like the reader or listener engaged in the contemporary moment of interpreting the text, the tree—or, in this case, the forest—has a "mediating role," as does "the story that gives it its voice."[31] In examples that resonate with the wild forests of both "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle, and gesture at the glimmering uncertainties of *le temps entre le chien et le loup* evoked by Chandler, de Certeau continues:

> "Stop!" says the forest the wolf comes out of. "Stop!" says the river, revealing its crocodile. But this actor, by virtue of the very fact that he is the mouthpiece of the limit, creates communication as well as separation: more than that, he establishes a border only by saying what crosses it, having come from the other side. He articulates it. He is also a passing through or over. In the story, the frontier functions as a third element.[32]

Similarly, the literary landscape of "*Kaun Lok*" mirrored a moral universe vacillating between the ideal of "human, meritorious behaviour" and "wild, unacceptable behaviour."[33] In what follows, I explore the convergence between these moral distinctions and the representation of that zone between *srok* and *prei*.

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[30] Forest, "Recit 21: Le Neak Ta Yeay Nguon, Recueil," in *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 155–75, 204. ("Dans les temps anciens, il n'y avait là qu'une forêt désertée, peuplée seulement par les troupeaux de bêtes sauvages. Plus tard, des bandits vinrent s'y réfugier en attendant qu'on oubliât leurs crimes." [In ancient times, there was nothing but a deserted forest, whose only inhabitants were packs of wild beasts. Later, bandits came to hide out there in the hope that their crimes would be forgotten.])

[31] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 127.

[32] Ibid.

[33] David P. Chandler, "Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-colonial Cambodian Society," in *Facing the Cambodian Past* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 49.

MORAL PERIMETERS: MAPPING AMBIGUITY IN THE *PREI*

Just as they occupied the material and psychological frontier between civilized and wild, forests marked the margins between the high and low realms of Buddhist cosmology. In this respect, the natural corridor between the *srok* and *prei* can also be seen as "a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place" whose "betrayal of an order" is embodied in the "flight of an exile": *kaun lok.* But at the same time, as de Certeau suggests, this *inter*land offers "a bewildering exteriority," allowing or causing "the alien element that was controlled in the interior" to re-emerge beyond its ordained borders. Within the frontiers of the family, for example, the "alien" is already there: the "disquieting familiarity" of which de Certeau speaks exists in the possibility for infanticide at the hearth, and the bestial instincts in the mother.[34] Conversely, the girls find in becoming creatures of the wild the interiority and sense of belonging to a family—albeit to a kindred union of spirits and mythical creatures—that they had failed to find in the home.

At the outer edges of the Buddhist moral universe, the powers of forest *yeak* and wildlife such as snakes and tigers were not constrained by the moral injunctions of Buddha. These beings might occasionally transgress the boundaries between *prei* and *srok,* but their deficit of merit ensured their power would eventually be controlled by morally superior, more meritorious beings.[35] This contrast between the wild, uncivilized inhabitants of the *prei* and the prescribed moral behavior of humans is reflected in the Cambodian *"Chbap Kaun Chiw,"* which compares "just and honest" and "stupid and vile" humans who grow up in a kingdom under a good sovereign with the "straight" and "twisted" trees that grow into a forest, and underscores the relative merits of wild animal behavior by stating that while even "ferocious and cruel" animals can be commanded, one should simply "turn away and ... distance" oneself from such "twisted" humans.[36] This moral resonates with *"Kaun Lok,"* where the eldest sister learns that she and her young charges will be safer in the forest than in the savage confines of a *srok* whose domesticity is distorted by their mother's cruelty. The act of going into the forest, in *"Kaun Lok"* as in "Hansel and Gretel," entails a literal, territorial displacement of moral responsibility. Forests provide not only a place in which to lose children and abandon them to nature, but also, by their very distance and difference from the *srok,* allow mothers, fathers, and stepparents to entertain and execute that which is unthinkable in a civilized setting. Similarly, in the Wat Srolauv chronicle and a roughly contemporary manuscript, *Satra Lboek Robah Ksat,* male villagers assigned to stand guard over the forest during one community's flight from the Siamese army begin to lose their morality. Thefts begin. The poor become rich, and hide their loot in the forest, whence it is plundered and lost. The narrator of the chronicle, Vénérable Batum Baramey Pich, imputes their moral decline in part to distance from their *srok* and all it embodies in terms of familial relations and responsibilities. "In great distress, far from their homes, they became greedy. They thought no longer of death, nor of the disappearance of their wealth,

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[34] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* pp. 126–28.

[35] See Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest"; and Charles F. Keyes, "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia," in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), pp. 44–45.

[36] Kaun Chau, stanzas 24–25, in *The "Cbāp"* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, n.d.).

and no longer thought with fondness of their home country, nor of their distance from their parents."[37] Here again, as in the *"Kaun Lok"* narrative, crossing the frontier, as de Certeau argues, "allows or causes the re-emergence of the alien element that was controlled in the interior."

As the above narratives indicate, the *prei* has its own complex cosmology. A preserve of *yeak*, the forest was an unregulated space, a realm of danger. But it was also a vital source of livelihood for many who sculpted their village from it, clearing land and settling at its perimeter, but still venturing back into the forest for kindling, firewood, game, wild roots, medicinal herbs, and other forest products. In tandem with this process, distinctions were made about types of foods and what they represented. As Eve Zucker has recently noted, taboos still hold in Cambodia about forest food: "wild game, alcohol, and forest foods are often associated with wildness whereas cooked rice, domestic meat products, and domestic vegetables are associated with civility."[38] Thus, at one point in the *Satra Lboek Robah Ksat*, villagers fleeing Siamese troops head back into the forest specifically to find wild roots and plants to prepare a soup, but find that without fish or *prâhok*—fermented fish paste here equated with domesticity and civilization—the soup is so tasteless that even in their hunger they cannot swallow it.[39] Over time, Cambodians established a range of ritual and belief to regulate interaction with the forest realm, and so to accommodate the daily necessity of moving between *srok* and *prei* in the search for such staples as firewood and *trakuon* (a water plant consumed by the girls in *"Kaun Lok"* that is a common vegetable across Cambodia).[40]

THE FOREST AS/AT THE EDGES OF RITUAL NARRATIVE

As documented elsewhere by Eveline Porée-Maspero, Ashley Thompson, and Ang Choulean, the most evocative and powerful of ritual narratives is that of *hav proleung*, or calling of the spirits. As Ang writes, forests are still perceived as the destinations of vital parts of the *proleung*, a Khmer term nearly equivalent to "soul," which can be cajoled into the forest by ghosts. "In popular belief," writes Ang, one or more of a person's nineteen *proleung* can leave the body "when spirits of the forest lure some of the *proleung* out of the body and into the forest by conjuring up false and seductive images of their domain which is, in reality, wild and harsh."[41] Diagnosis of this condition and performance of the ceremony to call the lost *proleung*

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[37] Khin Sok, *"Satra Voat Kroch,"* vol. 3, strophes 915–922, in *L'annexion du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens au XIXeme siècle d'après les deux poèmes du Vénérable Batum Baramey Pich* (Paris: Editions You-feng, 2002), pp. 162, 249.

[38] Eve Zucker, "In The Absence of Elders: Chaos and Moral Order in the Aftermath of the Khmer Rouge," in *People of Virtue: Religion, Power, and Moral Order in Cambodia*, ed. Alix Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, forthcoming). These distinctions have developed in tandem with moral codes, such as the belief that rabbits, which hold a special place in Buddhist symbolism and folklore, should not be eaten.

[39] Khin Sok, *"Satra Lboek Roba Ksat,"* pp. 293, 337. The value of *prâhok* is reiterated in the *Wat* Srolauv manuscript, where it is featured—alongside tobacco, betel, rice, paddy, and salt—in a survival package that the King of Siam distributes to Khmer refugees fleeing Vietnamese troops into Siam.

[40] Miech Ponn, *Komrong aiksaa sterbi propayni tumniem tumnoap kmae* (Writings about Khmer Customs and Traditions), part 1 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 155–57.

[41] Ang Choulean, *Brah Ling* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2004).

from the forest occurs only in vaguely defined cases of illnesses, when a person is vacillating between the two clearly defined states of "sickness and health."[42] When a person becomes delirious, and seems not to know him- or herself, writes Miech Ponn, popular belief has it that some of that person's soul, large or small, has gone off into the wilds—back to nature—to relax and recuperate. As part of the recalling of the spirits, a song is sung enjoining the *proleung* to return to the body so that all nineteen spirits can be reunited in the body, before they are eaten by wild animals in the forest.[43] This ceremony and the *srok/prei* binary, notes Khing Hoc Dy, feature in the story of "Heng Yan" and the *Vessantara-Jātaka* published by the Buddhist Institute in 1950 and 1966.[44]

A deeply spiritual place, the forest also possessed benign and protective potential. The forest was the Buddha's destination when he sought enlightenment, and the Bodhi tree, a place of shade and rest, a site of spiritual advancement. In Buddhist texts, woodland settings are sometimes idealized as the perfect site for the forsaking of human attachment. The *Sutta of the Noble Search* thus speaks of "a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest" where the Buddha sat down to think.[45] In Khmer culture, trees also hold a central place as shelters and repositories of *neak ta* (ancestral spirits). Ouk Samith, a revolutionary born in rural Battambang during the last decades of colonial rule, remembered:

> ...the benevolent protection of *neak ta* who lived in the woods. Sometimes my father and other peasants went to build up the hut of branches, behind a big tree, which protected the [*neak ta*] ... My father said "The Khmers must not attack trees, they must not forget that our ancestors came from the forest."[46]

Forest spirits were not above preaching care of the environment, as in a well-known story of a legal contest between a judge and a tiger, during which a forest spirit rules in favor of the accused tiger and against the human plaintiff on the basis that "all humans staying in the forest always cut the branches or leaves" of trees and plants.[47] As mundane deities or "gods of the realm of men," the *neak ta* also protected villages.[48] They have also acted as moral arbiters, delimiting gossip and dishonesty: to speak badly (*khoh moat khoh ka*) under a spirited tree is still thought to risk inviting

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[42] Ibid., p. 31. See also Ashley Thompson, "Le hau bralin: étude du rite et du texte" (doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris III, 1993) and "The Calling of the Souls: A Study of the Khmer Ritual *Hau Bralin*" (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996).

[43] Miech Ponn, *Komrong aiksaa sterbi propayni tumniem tumnoap kmae* (Writings about Khmer Customs and Traditions), Part 1 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 155–57.

[44] Khing Hoc Dy, *Pithi haov prolong* (*Notes sur la cérémonie de l'appel des esprits vitaux*) (Phnom Penh: Librairie Angkor, 2004), pp. 35–37.

[45] Donald K. Swearer, Sommai Premchit, and Phaithun Dokbuakaew, *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and their Legends* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2004), p. 8.

[46] "Testimony of Ouk Samith," in *Cambodge: la revolution dans la forêt*, ed. J. Debré (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), p. 50.

[47] "*Rieung Mahar Ru Si Preah* Klaa," in *Prochum rieung preeng kmae*, vol. 3, ed. The Mores and Customs Commission (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 1–7.

[48] Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 49–80.

retribution from the *neak ta* who inhabits it.[49] Today, oaths at court are still sworn not to the state or before the image of the Buddha, but in the presence of the *neak ta.*

The historian Alain Forest has argued that *neak ta* represent the only figures of pardon in Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Cambodia.[50] The *"Kaun Lok"* story also reveals an understanding and caring pantheon of spirits outside the orbit of the malicious, soul-snatching spirits of the forest and of those *neak ta* whose protection, much like some modern-day Mafia, is only secured by placatory offerings. Even when life takes such a calamitous turn that people, such as the girls in *"Kaun Lok,"* are so preoccupied with their own survival that they fail to make offerings to the Gods, *devata* can intervene.

In addition, forests offered sanctuaries from the elements, from war and destruction, combining the promise of protection with a sense of permanence. The Khmer term *mluap* (shade or shadow) has benign connotations, associated with protection, and lacks the sinister associations (shady, being shadowed) of its English equivalent. Just as forests were beyond the sway of the Buddhist moral order, they were also at least partially out of range of foreign armies. When occupying troops—Siamese, Vietnamese, or French—went forth to instill "order" and allegiance in violent displays that confirmed the laws of Buddhist impermanence, by burning civilian habitats such as temples and houses, forests escaped such targeted destruction.[51]

As a place of ancestral genesis, the forest was a place to come *from.* As a refuge in times of chaos, it was also a place for ordinary people to run to, but only when one was running *from* danger and unwanted change, and not as a point of destination per se. The function of the forest in *"Kaun Lok"* and in the Wat Srolauv chronicle is not dissimilar from that of sylvan sites in European fairytales such as "Hansel and Gretel." It is a site for transformation, a flight path (from wicked parents, who may or may not symbolize local or royal leaders who have abandoned their people); a journey through time; and a refuge from a home rendered alien by domestic threat (the wicked mother in *"Kaun Lok"*) or external upheaval (the Vietnamese troops met by Narin and Meas in the Wat Srolauv chronicle). For European readers brought up on Grimm, Anderson, Kenneth Graham, and Disney, both stories lack satisfactory resolution: there is no "out" from the forest to the certainty of home. Witches and weasels are not vanquished. Instead, the girls become creatures of the forest, while both the mother in *"Kaun Lok,"* a woman of scant merit, and Meas, a man of meritorious deeds in the Wat Srolauv chronicle, die there.

In "Songs," Chandler stresses the role of vertical units and strictly measured and regulated arrangements in structuring Khmer aesthetic, moral, and social worlds. Writing on storytelling, mythology, and fairytales, Walter Benjamin has entertained the notion of "the hierarchy of the world of created things" at whose apex is "righteous man," and which "reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate by many gradations." Benjamin also suggests a hierarchy of narrative form, where fairytales occupy a more civilized stratum than myth, and argues that animals who come to the

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[49] Personal communication, Maurice Eisenbruch, January 8, 2005.

[50] Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, p. 83.

[51] See, for example, Forest, "Recit 17: Les Neak Ta Ta Srei et Yeay Bo," in *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 183–84. During the reign of Ang Duong at Longvek: "Countless Vietnamese mobilized to fight Cambodia. The Khmers could not resist them: they escaped en masse into the forests, for fear of Vietnamese exactions."

aid of children in fairytales epitomize the empathy between humanity and nature, and convey a lesson to "meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning (*untermut*) and high spirits (*übermut*)..." The liberating magic of the fairytale, in Benjamin's analysis, is this lesson of nature's complicity with a man liberated from the constraining interpretive frameworks of myth.[52]

"*Kaun Lok*" upturns the notion of animals coming to the aid of man, and also upsets the order of things implicit in most European tales of transformation, where bad spells transform humans into animals (e.g., "The Frog Prince," "Beauty and the Beast," "The Twelve Swans") and good spells release them. Rather, the girls are helped by supernatural spirits in their translation into birds, a metamorphosis that allows them a release from the mortal coil which tied them to an abusive mother.

Building on Benjamin, de Certeau, Eco, Thierry, Forest, and Chandler, I suggest that the composers and re-tellers of "*Kaun Lok*" were not simply mobilizing the forest as a symbol of the wild and lawless in order to reinforce a preordained hierarchy between the wild and the civilized, but that both tales used the forest as a realm of possibilities for transformation, and as a site of transition. In "*Kaun Lok*" the forest also offers scope for mobility and transformation, offering narrator and listeners an exit from the turbulent topography of war, displacement, and bereavement. In the same way that mid-twentieth-century readers of "Hansel and Gretel," a tale fashioned in an earlier era of chaos and darkness, used aspects of this and other fairytales to make sense of a world plunged into the abyss by World War II, so the audience of "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle had in these texts a means of making sense of the violence and displacement that war had rendered quotidian. As moral boundaries are transgressed, geographies collapse: the catalysts of disaster are humans acting with animal heads and hearts.[53]

In "*Kaun Lok*," as in many other Cambodian folk stories, writes Thierry, animals are "the brothers of men," reflecting Buddhist beliefs in the transmigration of souls and rebirth in animal form.[54] In "*Kaun Lok*," the girls are reborn as birds before they have died, and thus transported into the ultimate twilight zone of premature reincarnation. But as the story unfolds, the departure of their spirits is hinted at again and again. On their first night, the girls are literally frightened out of their wits: so scared, in the narrator's words, that "it is almost as if they've lost their *proleung*." On their attempt to return home for food, their mother beats them so fiercely with a club that they collapse into oblivion, and it is the *arak devata* who restores their consciousness. Here is the pivotal moment of death and awakening; but, as Thierry suggests, their abandonment was a form of moral and spiritual murder: "A new life arises from this sacrifice, and separates two worlds: that of the human, the world *loka*, and that of the forests, protected by the *devata*." In the story, their consciousness and place in the human world is tied to what they eat, how they dress, and their powers of speech. Not only do they stop eating cooked food, but their one *sampot* and one shirt turn to rags, and as their mouths harden into beaks, they find they can no longer form human words. But they retain their human sensibilities, and their powers of aural comprehension, lest anyone should come looking for them: an inner, inviolable core of humanity.

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[52] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1997), pp. 101, 103.

[53] Donald Haase, "Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24 (2000): 360–77.

[54] Solange Thierry, *De la rizière a la forêt: contes Khmers* (Paris: Harmattan, 1988), p. 8.

The forest in "*Kaun Lok*" and in the Wat Srolauv chronicle becomes a place of spiritual, as well as social and geographic, mobility; a place of incalculable outcomes, where the art of transition, of movement, of flight—as of restoring temples and accumulating merit in the Wat Srolauv chronicle—become crucial. The categories of "*srok*" and "*prei*," civilized and wild, function as useful idioms in such proverbs as "*thvoe kar aoy prei, bat kar aoy phteah, thvoe kar aoy phteah, bat kar aoy prei*" (you cannot work at the same time in the home and the forest),[55] but are insufficient to narrate and make sense of this world whose moral and social spaces have been inverted and destroyed by the extremes of war. The notion of a clear, linear boundary between these categories is similarly inadequate. Instead, the spaces in these stories where humans enter the forest and thus ensure both the partial domestication of the wild/animal habitat, or the partial bestialization of the civilized/human habitat, offer scope for movement: for descent, decline, error, escape, loss, and release—whether through death or flight.

In the late nineteenth century, when Cambodia was still thick with forest, *prei* served not only as a marker of what was not *srok* but also denoted freedom and potential; in a Rousseauian twist, its savagery was tinged with scope for nobility and mobility. Writing in 1878, Aymonier and Son Diep translate *prei* as "forêt, liberté" (forest, liberty); a *prei sueng* as a "citizen" or "free man"; a "*kaun prei*" (child of the forest) as a child born out of wedlock; and *dey prei* as "virgin territory."[56] The forest accommodates animist beliefs and explicates change that does not fall within strict Buddhist frameworks. These are untrammelled forces, which defy the control of destiny or the legislative power of *kamma*, but are not completely outside the orbit of human communication. As Ang shows, over the centuries a complex system of exchange has developed between the "*srok*" and the "*prei*," regulated by ritual offerings of food that, both raw (bananas and sugar cane, symbolizing "domesticity and sweetness") and cooked (rice), all contrast with "the wild, rough ... sphere of the forest." Here, the bipolarity of the wild and the civilized comes unstuck: unruly, wily forest spirits lure *proleung* from the *srok* and into their domain through shape-shifting and mirage, while members of the *srok* entice the forest spirits with the exotic fruits of planned cultivation and domestication.[57] This corridor between two worlds is symbolized by the location of the girls in a *ktom*: their mother does not abandon them to the forest floor, but leads them to a raised, thatched shelter that is still a common feature of rural Cambodia; such shelters are used seasonally as living stations near paddy fields. The same word, and a similar structure, is used for spirit houses, or *ktom neak ta*.

Both "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle tell a lesson not only about the value of communicating with the natural habitat and the animal world, but about the place for human agency and for *übermut* (high spirits) and *untermut* (cunning) in negotiating with one's environment and dealing with change. There is little room for either in the harsh human habitat and forest environment of "*Kaun Lok*," but the eldest daughter emerges as a paragon of morality in adversity, whose later decision to care for her younger charges, rather than blindly obey her mother's admonitions, teaches us that it is not enough just to listen to our elders.

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[55] Joseph Guesdon, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1930), p. 1274.

[56] Aymonnier, *Dictionnaire Francais-Khmer*, p. 309.

[57] Ang, *Brah Ling*, pp. 1, 10, 13.

Literary critic Umberto Eco writes that there are two approaches to a walk through the woods. The first is destination-based, and involves trying "one or several routes (so as to get out of the wood as fast as possible, say, or to reach the house of grandmother, Tom Thumb, or Hansel and Gretel)." The second is journey-based, and involves walking "so as to discover what the wood is like and find out why some paths are accessible and others are not."[58] In Eco's "fictional woods," as in the tales of "*Kaun Lok*" and the chronicle of Wat Srolauv, the emphasis is not on fault lines separating the forest from other realms, but on pathways in, through, and across the forest—and, sometimes, out of it as well. This metaphor of the path is reiterated by the mobility of the key protagonists. What emerges from Chandler's readings and translations of "*Kaun Lok*" and Wat Srolauv, as from the ethnographies of Ang and Thompson, is recognition of the absence of a notion of a linear boundary, of a circle cordoning off the space of the forest from that which is around it. The messy edge inhabited by the *kaun lok*, the spatial equivalent of the twilight zone, and a nesting place for negotiation between the human and the wild as symbolized in the feathered girls, is not dissimilar to the slip zone between the *srok* and the *prei*. "*[N]othing* precisely defines the *srok*" (my emphasis), writes Serge Thion; it is "neither a network of villages, nor an ecclesiastical unity, and barely an administrative unit" but, above all, "a range of activities that one can cover on foot."[59] As more recently defined by Khing Hoc Dy, "*srok*" can mean rice paddy, vegetable fields or fruit orchards near houses, and an assortment of buildings.[60] In other words, the boundaries of the *srok*, unlike those of Buddhist monasteries and Khmer temples, are marked not by fences, walls, boundary stones, milestones, or other artificial markers, but by human paths of experience and the force of habit.

As Forest notes, *sroks* were born of cleared *prei*, and their founders inhabit their domain long after their deaths through their conversion into *neak ta*. *Prei*, the forest, was a space that had not yet been managed and brought into the fold of the *srok*. The best and the worst can emerge from this confusion, writes Forest:

> The forest is a place of illicit and monstrous relations, a space of dangerous forces, all the more dangerous when they remain there, not clearly identified, and which can come out of the forest at any moment to attack and destabilize the *srok*. But it is also a place of regeneration from which, after clearing, the *srok* is born.[61]

Similarly, notions of boundaries between kingdoms in Southeast Asia and China were of broad swaths of land that in and of themselves constituted landscapes and possessed their own cosmological meanings and their own dynamism, moving north, west, south, or east as dynasties and the populations over which they held sway contracted or expanded. These were no fine, immutable lines on a map. They

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[58] Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 27.

[59] Serge Thion, "Remodelling Broken Images: Manipulation of Identities towards and beyond the Nation: An Asian Perspective," in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relationships in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*, ed. R. Guidieri, F. Pellizzi, and S. Tambiah (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 239.

[60] Khing, *Pithi haov prolong*, p. 3.

[61] Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, p. 15.

were broad corridors where what Anderson has called the "imperceptible shifts" in sovereignty, as played out between Southeast Asian polities and dynasties, paralleled a similar fluidity of movement between existences in the human realm.[62] In the forest as constituted in "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle, we see the moral and cosmological equivalent of these border lands: territories beyond the absolute sovereignty of man, animal, Buddha, or spirit; these were zones allowing for transit and transformation. As the horizons of human settlement and mobility expanded over the centuries, Buddhist, animist, and Brahmin beliefs became intertwined, the landscape of the Khmer empire became sacralized through a complex network of names, markers, shrines, sightings, and sitings.[63] During the French Protectorate, more-secular, political notions of spatial and conceptual boundaries contracted and solidified.

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL CAMBODIA

Chandler's particular gift as a historian has been his enthusiastic embrace and acute analysis of a broad range of materials, long before it was fashionable to mobilize multiple media in the interests of scholarly research. Elsewhere he has brought to light and analyzed Khmer representations of spatial and moral order through a reading of two nineteenth-century list-maps (defined below) that date at least to the reign of Yasovarman I (889–c.910), founder of the Angkor empire. Chandler describes these documents as "an inventory of the kingdom, a map of and for the use of the ancestral spirits [*neak ta*]."[64] Neither strategic instruments nor scientific images, these documents mapped the spatial, temporal, cultural, and spiritual coordinates of the Khmer Empire. A legend to a larger, unwritten map of the Khmer cosmological universe, they provided the key coordinates linking the Cambodian land mass with the ancestral guardians of the Kingdom's destiny. In both their presentation of information and their intended application, these early Khmer list-maps thus differed markedly from nineteenth-century European maps, whose abstract organization of space effaced indigenous social structures, reducing complex cultural topographies to blank spaces. By rendering uncolonized territories as *tabula rasa,* European cartography flattened the spiritual significance of the Cambodian landscape and made the colonial appropriation and occupation of foreign territories a much easier proposition.[65] From 1903 to 1917, the French Protectorate oversaw numerous land surveys and mapping exercises resulting in the production of three distinct "official" maps for Cambodia, the development of a Geography syllabus, and the production of Indochina Geography primers for use in colonial schools.

One of the strongest features of the precolonial Khmer government was its regional character. If Angkorean architecture mirrored Mount Meru, then the

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[62] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY, and London: Verso, 1991).

[63] Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, pp. 52–53.

[64] "L'inauguration d'un monument commémoratif royal au Cambodge," in *Bulletin du Comité d'Asie Française* 97 (1909): 171–73.

[65] Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 94. See also J. Brian Harley, *The History of Cartography* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 279.

administrative structures replicated that of the animist network of *neak ta*, each anchored in a *srok*: their powers nontransferable beyond their immediate locality.[66] Khmer *neak ta* are mired in networks of protection, placation, and patronage that resemble those tying governors to particular fiefdoms.[67] New administrative policies enacted in Cambodia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to shift this traditional "galactic" arrangement of power to one in which the central government had tighter control over outlying regions.[68] The French Protectorate supplanted traditional territorial arrangements with a series of municipalities, town councils, provinces, and communes modeled on European systems of land and people management.

The entrenchment of colonial rule and investment in infrastructure from the turn of the century onwards saw vast tracts of brush and forestland cleared in the name of the colonial national aesthetic, the salvation of heritage, or the creation of new roads. Trees were tamed and pruned into telegraph poles, whose signature wires crisscrossed the sky. New roads reduced the potential for pondering which route to take through the forest; the roads cleaved the forest into bitumen strips, or bypassed it altogether, thereby shrinking the physical and temporal distance between town and countryside, and facilitating the mental leap from local to national centers of identity. New telecommunications systems cemented notions of community across vast areas of space, albeit among a small, educated elite, allowing the consolidation of a new system of administration, run on a "territorial-cartographic basis."[69]

It was, however, through the attempted enforcement of crystalline boundaries between "city" and "country" milieus and its regimentation of rural and urban space that the European administration most directly clashed with Khmer notions of "*prei*" and "*srok*." In Cambodian tradition, the divide between *prei* and *srok* accommodated a broad spectrum of human and animal life. All that was tamed—including domesticated, agricultural animals such as pigs, hens, and oxen—resided firmly within the boundaries of *srok*, and as such were deemed compatible with urban living. From 1900 to 1905, a string of legislation tightened the municipal organization of Phnom Penh. The hygiene of markets was regulated, the price of a boat ride fixed, and traffic rules created. It was henceforth forbidden to drive elephants on the streets, to ride horses at a gallop, to set off firecrackers, or to hold cockfights or other games likely to attract crowds.[70] Integral to the capital's expansion and modernization was the redesignation of preexisting settlements of Cambodian tradespeople and farmers who, once a major constituent of Phnom Penh, were now pushed to its physical and social periphery. Legislation enacted in August 1907 divided the capital into urban and suburban spaces.[71] In a further attempt to sanitize

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[66] This immobility contrasts with the broad spirit circuits in which some of Burma's thirty-seven Nats travel.

[67] See Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 86–87, 89–90, 97–99, 102.

[68] Anne Hansen, "Religion and Identity in Cambodian Buddhism," a paper delivered at the Association for Asian Studies Conference, March 1998 (Washington, DC), pp. 3–4.

[69] See Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p. 310; and Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 170–78.

[70] Charles Meyer, *La vie quotidienne des Français en Indochine 1860–1910* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 138.

[71] The European, Chinese mercantile, and royal/elite Cambodian Quarters demarcated by the Tonle Sap, Boulevard Miche, Kampot Avenue, Bak-Tuk bridge, and Doudart de Lagrée Boulevard, were declared urban. The suburbs incorporated the Khmer districts of Russey Keo,

and urbanize the capital, legislation in December 1907 imposed punitive taxes on horses, cattle, buffaloes, goats, and dogs. Ox carts were now taxed at up to five times the tax on a pedicab.[72] Throughout the following decades, such legislation increased, as did the disparity between city and country.

Colonial landscaping and the introduction of secular associations such as Scouts and Youth Hostel Associations served further to subvert Khmer cosmologies and to convert the spaces on maps into lived experience of the "national" habitat. In the 1930s, the cultivation of the notion of "a national landscape" and bonds between that landscape and elite Cambodian youth were forged through regulated youth camps and scouting activities, aimed at the education, "civilization," and character-building of city-dwellers through regulated exposure to the *prei*. Founded in the 1930s, the Cambodian Scout movement worked to inculcate a love of the land through forest hikes, camps, and outdoor activities. Excursions to the provinces of Kampot and elsewhere involved long treks to such scenic sights as Phnom Sah, Phnom Bokor, and the waterfall at Teuk Chu, to teach the "various skills [lit: *vicchea*, knowledge] that scouts must and should know, in order to become 'civilized beings' worthy of their King."[73] The year 1938 also saw the launch of Cambodia's first Youth Hostel Association (*yuvasalaa*), which established hostels in Takeo, Kampot, and Siem Reap in the tradition of "big countries like France" that "build many such places to visit, relax, take fresh air for health during holidays ... wherever there are mountains, waterfalls, and fine forests."[74] By this point, at least in the minds of Cambodia's few, Western-educated nationalist elite, the "*prei*" had become a tool for sculpting the national character. In a parallel development, the forest retreated from what was now taken as a natural, national "Khmer" habitat. Stone temples became the focus of national anthems, and a deforested, clean Angkor was featured on the national flag. The national landscape celebrated in the first Khmer novels—from Kim Hak's 1932 novel, *Water of the Tonlesap*, to Rim Kin's *Reuang Sophat* of 1939 and Nou Hach's later *Melea Toungcet*[75]—was a rural idyll of green rice paddies dotted with palm trees. However, the incorporation of "*prei*" into a national landscape and a rational cartographic grid did not denude forests of their supernatural attributes.

As one Cambodian colleague recalls, when visiting Phnom Bokor in the 1960s, he and his friends took care not to mouth the words "tiger" or "snake," referring instead to these creatures in code, as "PM" (*polis militaire*, or military police) and "ivy," so as not to anger forest spirits.[76] In a report on the Cardamon Mountains published on the eve of the civil war, students of the Faculty of Archaeology in

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Boeng-Kak, Boeng Decho, Petit Takeo, and Chrui Changvar. Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, INDO GGI 2189 GGI Beau, Arrêté, August 16, 1907.

[72] Archives d'Outre-Mer, INDO GGI 2189 GGI Beau and RSC Luce Arrêté, December 25, 1907.

[73] "Yeung baan tutuel sombot tvay preahpor chaymonkul mouy ombi puk khrumkayrithi doucmien secday khangkhraom nih" (We have received the following letter of blessing from the Scout Group), *Nagaravatta*, April 24, 1937, pp. 1–2. The language used in this letter indicates that the author is royal.

[74] See Monsieur le President du Yuvsala, "*Yuvsala*" (Youth Hostels), *Nagaravatta*, September 10, 1938; "*Ploang Dei Yuvsala*," *Nagaravatta*, December 24, 1938, p. 2.

[75] The first modern Cambodian novel was Kim Hak's *Tuk Tonlesap*, serialized in *Kambuja Surya* in 1932. See Klairung Amratisha, "The Cambodian Novel: a Study of its Emergence and Development" (doctoral dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 1998).

[76] Personal communication with Tuy Someth, Phnom Penh, July 25, 2006.

Phnom Penh observed the existence throughout Cambodia of "a legendary geography (*une géographie légendaire*) which merits collection."[77] Within a year, massive aerial bombardments were transforming that mythical landscape into the scar tissue of war, obliterating human life and fracturing cultural memories.

LANDSCAPING WAR AND REVOLUTION

Despite the continued effervescence of the worlds outside the surveyors' lens, colonial town planning and the corresponding stratification of Cambodia into "urban," "suburban," and "rural" spaces would lead to massive social cleavage. The cleavage was reiterated by Sihanouk's post-independence policies of not allowing "peasants" to go barefoot in the streets or to pedal cyclos bare-chested, and by the continuation of colonial ordinances restricting the maintenance of livestock in urban areas. Such polarization ultimately laid the groundwork for the iconoclastic anti-urbanism of the Khmer Rouge (KR), which had used the *prei* as a base of its operations from the 1960s into the 1970s; and that, on gaining power as Democratic Kampuchea (DK) in 1975, catapulted *prei* into *srok* and *srok* into *prei*, obliterating colonial cartographies and overturning Khmer cosmologies.[78]

In the DK, the *prei* resumed its nineteenth-century role as a place of fear, moral turbulence, and darkness. In rare instances, *prei* retained its ambivalence: a site of abduction and execution for most, it also offered a perilous escape route to the border with Thailand and with Vietnam, and for some, to eventual resettlement in third countries. But for most living under the DK regime, the forest was no longer somewhere one could run "to" or through when running "from;" instead, it became a terminal, a place where the regime took, and frequently dispatched, suspected infidels. The forest's function as a legitimate, free source of sustenance was also denied. While abolishing property, the DK declared *Ângkar* owner of even the minutest forest fruit. Fresh water snails and clams became a delicacy whose clandestine foraging invited savage retribution.

As Ebihara cautions, the transformation of *srok* to *prei* was not purely the work of the DK. Her research site at Svay suffered daily bombings over a protracted period during the summer of 1973, and many villagers fled to Phnom Penh. In 1975, after the KR victory, they returned to Svay, only to find an overgrown wilderness where their homes had once stood.[79] As in the verse narratives of Wat Srolauv, war, and not just individual political ideologies, played havoc with the ecological underpinnings of sociocultural stability. But the DK fashioned a new nightmare from this lunar landscape. Where earlier nationalists had worked to territorialize memory, the DK sought to erase memory itself, attempting to demolish the social habitus and emotional bearings of millions of Cambodians through relocation, reeducation, and demolition campaigns that aimed to eradicate both familial attachments and attachments to specific places. The map was recast. Provinces became zones, and

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[77] La redaction, "Métiers de la forêt et vie religieuse dans les Cardamones," *Bulletin des Étudiants de la Faculté d'Archéologie* (December 1968): 82.

[78] See François Ponchaud, "Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution," in *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 154–59.

[79] May Ebihara, "Memories of the Pol Pot Era in a Cambodian Village," in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, CSEAS, Northern Illinois University, 2002), pp. 91–108.

names became numbers. This subversion was seen not only in cartography, but in the emptying of cities of people, and the planting of coconut palms in the capital. This emptying of the cities found an eerie echo in the legendary depletion of Phnom Penh's bird population.

In her moving account of the deterioration of a village in Svay during the Khmer Rouge period, May Ebihara shows how the *srok*, or human habitat and domesticity itself, became fuel for the revolution, and notes that just as "aspects of the landscape can be culturally conceptualized, the physical setting can, of course, be literally constructed and materially altered by human actions."[80] Village homes were torn down and used for firewood. The temple pond, a symbol of meditative tranquility, was filled in and used as a vegetable garden. For villagers from the once tidy, lush habitat of Svay, the months spent in the *prei* at Kok King in 1975, before their final relocation, "served as a transition, a Turnerian liminal period ... between the old society and the DK regime that inverted or destroyed most of the villagers' former ways of life and thrust them into a new revolutionary order."[81]

In its bestiality, ignorance, and neglect, the regime took on all the characteristics of the mother in "*Kaun Lok*," abandoning its people to the forest with rations equivalent to those with which she sent her daughters to their fate. Like the mother in "*Kaun Lok*," who took her children into the forest to achieve what she could not perhaps bring herself to do in the morally calibrated landscape of the *srok*, the DK also took people away. Despite the extraordinary depths of bestiality plumbed at S-21 or Tuol Sleng, the regime, as if in an effort to maintain a "clean" capital, transported their victims to the exterior of Phnom Penh, choosing for their execution site the overgrown grounds of a former Chinese cemetery at Cheoung Ek. Those who died natural deaths, often from disease, malnutrition, and starvation, received at best hurried burials, returning them to the soil, while those dispatched in the "killing fields" and the badlands of the *prei* were left to rot.

The new regime inherited from the colonial progenitor it blamed for its country's ills a stark binary view and an obsession with borders. There was little room among those on the borderline or on the wrong side of the boundary between "new" and "base" people (a boundary itself inscribed in the label "17th April people") for cunning or high spirits. The state itself appropriated divine rights of transformation, attempting to sculpt new people into old, and city dwellers into farmers. At the same time, its extremist ideology and its increasingly paranoid purges denied some fighters and cadres in its rank the rights to personal, political, or societal transformation for which they had strived. "When we were soldiers ... we fought until we nearly died," remembered one woman who had entered the notorious 703rd Division of the Khmer Rouge army when she was a teenager, fleeing the *srok* for the *prei*: "We slept in the forest. But after the victory, it turns out that *Ângkar* will not let us stay in Phnom Penh."[82] Like many others, she was subsequently imprisoned for suspected disloyalty to the regime.

In his recent memoir *The Gate*, François Bizot tells of his captivity in a Khmer Rouge "liberated zone," where a patch of bamboo, pond, brush, and forest at the foot of a mountain, similar to that in "*Kaun Lok*," becomes a prison camp and murder site.

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[80] Ibid., p. 93.

[81] Ibid., pp. 93–95.

[82] Huy Vannak, *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2003), pp. 72, 156, 157.

Here, like the girls in "*Kaun Lok*," people are knocked unconscious and left to die. On his return to confront these demons some thirty years later, Bizot senses "their souls slipping away like whitefish among the blades of grass."[83] This malevolent landscape is bereft of guardian spirits; the world has turned so far that the fate of the "*Kaun Lok*" girls is to be envied compared with that of millions of Cambodians abandoned to an early grave. Here and there, surreptitious invocations are made to Buddha and the *neak ta*, but with a ban on religious observance, no food to spare, and all but a handful of monks disrobed, spirits cannot be placated, and new merit cannot be made. In some sites, however, folktales persisted. Heng Kimvan, who lived in Kong Mieh district of Kompong Cham during the DK period, remembers hearing the story of the woman who shrank the meat. The bird, its cry of "*svet te chav*," and the telling and retelling of this tale, were all part of the soundscape of his DK childhood. Its themes of violence, escape, disappearing food, cannibalization, and the transgression of family bonds, Buddhist strictures, and filial ethics may have helped its listeners to anchor the apparently meaningless wilderness of their lives into a pre-DK cultural terrain.[84]

Other meanings and functions of the *prei* continued during this period, alongside the DK's meta-narrative of progress and revolutionary modernity. Next to *Ângkar*'s human machinations and the repeated failures of the state to protect its citizens, the protective powers of forest spirits retained strong allure. In tangled scrub at the foot of Phnom Sah in Kampot, destination of an earlier mentioned 1930s scout-group outing, a small, thatched shrine (*ktom*) was maintained by villagers with the tacit consent of their village chief, during DK and after. Here, in surreptitious silence, villagers who had long lost faith in both the party and their king, whose calls to revolution had led them into the maquis in 1970, venerated a spirit king they described to me in 1995 as lord of all the forests and mountains in the region—the powerful *neak ta* Bentougong.[85]

Visual and Verbal Narratives of *Prei* after the DK

In the 1980s, the state-sponsored visual arts of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) often equated the DK with wilderness, even as it pursued its own campaigns to carve out a space in the forest, notably through the notorious K-5 campaign. Book jackets and memorial murals framed violent DK soldiers against a black silhouette of the forest, suggestive of the jagged edge between the *srok* and *prei*. Cartography met "thanatourism" in a map sculpted from skulls, at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crime, where territory and memory were remapped in a temporal narrative that wove human remains into a macabre mortuary landscape showing DK zones.[86] Elsewhere, the natural habitat was invoked to symbolize the

[83] François Bizot, *The Gate* (London: The Harvill Press, 2003).

[84] Personal communication with Heng Kimvan, Phnom Penh, January 19, 2005.

[85] Penny Edwards and Chan Sambath, "Ethnic Chinese in Cambodia," in *Ethnic Groups in Cambodia*, ed. W. Collins (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study [monograph], 1996), pp. 109–75.

[86] "Thanatourism" refers to the phenomenon of visiting places of death; see J. Lennon and M. Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (New York, NY, and London: Continuum, 2000). The map hung at Tuol Sleng for twenty years, from the early 1980s until 2001.

violence of silence in the DK.[87] A far cry from the 1930s and 1940s novels mentioned earlier, with their lush, green, fertile riverine landscapes, artist Phy Chan Than's *The Koh Tree* (oil on canvas, 1999) depicts the violent dislocation of the DK through a split and dismembered trunk, surrounded with a crimson current signifying a PRK slogan that people had lived in a river of blood and their bones had "grown into mountains."[88] Phy Chan Than's repertoire includes another work of the same year that entirely banishes the *prei* from an Angkorean temple scene, rendering Banteay Srey in soft hues and strokes. Reminiscent of Claude Monet's 1906 *Water Lilies*, this work conjures the rural idyll of *la douce France* which de Carné and his contemporaries had found so lacking at Angkor.[89] Writing of the metaphoric use of the *prei* in contemporary visual narratives of Cambodia, Ingrid Muan emphasizes the popularity of pastoral scenes for domestic display. Many of the consumers and producers of these idylls, she writes, are Khmer Rouge survivors who, "as urban dwellers, carry a sense of uneasiness—if not terror—for the countryside where they spent those fearful years." But that terror is erased from the benign images that artists produce in multiples, images that deny their own histories. Is this the "blankness of trauma," Muan asks, or is it "the will of the damaged to forget and go on?"[90]

This erasure of the Khmer Rouge era from such depictions of the *prei* may be seen as a reclamation of the forest from the one regime that, perhaps more than any other, occupied it and transformed it most fully from a place of refuge and a site of transformation, mobility, ancestry, spirituality, and escape to the lived antithesis of Rama's enchanted forest, a place where thousands and more died not "alone," like Meas of the Wat Srolauv chronicle, but in the company of their executioners or fellow victims; a place not for flights of birds or fancy, but a place smothered with too many memories, collective and individual, of death, denial, and destitution.

Conclusion

In his analysis of children, war, and fairytales in Europe, Donald Haase has emphasized the ambiguity of settings such as towers, forests, rooms, cages, ovens, and huts in their ability to conjure threat and promise, exile and return, alienation and familiarization. Haase suggests that readers and storytellers and their audiences during World War II and the Holocaust used fairytales as a template for their own experiences of displacement and future hopes, and that survivors familiar with such tales used the visual rhetoric of faerie realms to interpret unfamiliar and violent post-war landscapes. In the same way, the narratives analyzed by Chandler would have helped listeners and readers, in the nineteenth as in the twentieth century, to map the trauma of war and negotiate their way between the reality they faced, the idealized image of a world they knew, and the threat and promise of tomorrow.[91]

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[87] Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2001), p. 336.

[88] Ibid., pp. 336–37. My comparison with literary landscapes is flawed, but as Muan notes, Cambodian artists were prevented or dissuaded from painting landscapes at the time these novels were published, and in this respect they constitute an important record of indigenous aesthetic conceptions of the land.

[89] Ibid., pp. 324, 330.

[90] Ibid., p. 288.

[91] Haase, "Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales."

Eco has argued that while the wolf in a fairytale may well be traded for any other monster, such as an ogre, the reader is irreplaceable, and remains a "fundamental ingredient not only of the process of storytelling but also of the tale itself."[92] The relationship between text or story, reader and listener, in Cambodia today is calibrated by decades of civil and political chaos, and their legacies of moral ambiguity. As analyzed by one contemporary Cambodian researcher who grew up in a country at civil war, "*Kaun Lok*" illuminates the possibility of conflict within individuals and families: not only the bodies, but also the "fragmentary souls of the girls," are reconfigured through interactions with the forest. During this "time of evolution," the girls "suffer from the conflicts between opposing forces that determine their realities and way of life."[93] Decades of war followed by accelerated globalization have led both to ruptures with tradition and a dilution in the oral transmission of tales such as "*Kaun Lok.*" In rural as in urban areas, stories still circulate in temples, particularly on holy days, and in homes. A researcher at the Buddhist Institute found in 2004 that "*Kaun Lok*" did not figure in the memories of one village in Kompong Cham.[94] However, the tale still features in the folklore syllabus of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, where one lecturer's interpretation of "*Kaun Lok*" dwells not on transition and transcendence, but, reflecting 1980s prerogatives spelled out in public education, on the restitution of normality and order in a world emerging from chaos. Arguing that people should stay within the paths mapped out by society and the state, this lecturer uses the story to teach that crime does not pay, and that women must not forget their role as mothers and wives as set out in the "*Chbap Srey.*" Here, the mother in the story is both antihero and antithesis of the *srey krup leak*; she is a *srey derichan*, a bestial woman whose savagery exceeds that even of the tiger, which guards its offspring.[95]

As societies change, so does the cultural literacy required to make sense of such tales.[96] In his essay for this volume, Alexander Hinton illuminates an unlikely intertextuality between the destruction of an entire "lineage" in the *Tum Teav* epic and attempts to destroy an entire "faction" described in DK forced confessions and reiterated in DK slogans. Ghouls and the ghosts of recent history haunt some new Cambodian cinema, but television, rap, karaoke, and electronic games are the storytellers preferred by youth. But, even among urban youth, the *prei* still holds its resonance as a metaphor. On the walls of a dance room for disadvantaged youth, in a Phnom Penh slum building from whose fissured walls sprout shrubs and young

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[92] Eco, *Six Walks*, p. 1.

[93] Hel Rithy, "Dependent Origination: Towards a Theory of Meaning" (master's thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2004), pp. 74–76.

[94] Than Bunly, "The Status of Oral Folktale Narration in Contemporary Phreah Theat Thmor Da Village" (master's thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2004).

[95] Heng Kimvan, lecture notes: *Prajum rieungpreeng kmae piek buen (Mien 12 reung) saklbong seksa reuang daemkomnaet sat kaunlok. Prophup: Reung as'chaar* (Collected Khmer Folktales Volume 4 (12 stories): Attempts to study the story of the origins of the child-of-the-world bird: Source: Wonderful Tales); personal communication with Heng Kimvan, Phnom Penh, October 3, 2004, and January 18, 2005.

[96] For an insightful analysis of the changing social meanings of Khmer folktale in the State of Cambodia, see Judy Ledgerwood, "Gender Symbolism and Culture Change: Viewing the Virtuous Woman in the Khmer Story 'Mea Yoeng,'" in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May Ebihara, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 119–28.

trees, one slogan reads: "At home we each have our own mother, in the *prei*, we only have one mother." Here, the *prei* functions as a metaphor for urban modernity, where a growing number of rural-to-urban migrants, as well as children from broken families, must make substitute families and look out for each other.

PART III

NEW SONGS

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CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF ORDER: RELIGIOUS-BUILDING PROJECTS AND MORAL CHAOS

John Marston[1]

In "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," written while Cambodia was still in the Pol Pot period, David Chandler recounts Cambodian narratives built on conceptual categories of order and disorder while evoking the borderland between these two realms—the facility with which order falls into the surrounding forest-like chaos, the irony produced by an ideal of order in a world where it often doesn't exist, and the fragility of the order reconstructed after periods of chaos.[2] Two of the narratives conclude with different types of religious-building projects. One is the folk story of a crocodile, who in its confused attempt to serve his master, a Buddhist abbot, kills both the abbot and a princess. The story ends with the construction of a stupa for the ashes of the princess, seemingly a gesture of transcending ritually the chaos that has just taken place. The longest of the works Chandler analyzes is a verse narrative commemorating the building of a *wat* in the early nineteenth century, in a period of national integration that followed great social turmoil. In celebrating the building of the *wat*, the narrative itself serves to place the building project as part of a larger process of social reconstruction, with the narrative itself, which was probably to be read at a dedication ceremony, contributing to a passage from chaos to order.

I have been fascinated by the scale of religious-building construction that has taken place in Cambodia since the Pol Pot period, when Buddhism and other religious practices were prohibited and many religious structures were destroyed. Religious-building projects have especially boomed since 1989, after constitutional

[1] Some research for this paper was conducted with a grant from the Center for Khmer Studies with funding by the Luce Foundation. My thanks to Prak Sonnara, who accompanied me on several of my visits to Ros Sarin's complex, and who was a helpful sounding board for my observations. Thanks also to Elizabeth Guthrie, Anne Hansen, and Chhuon Hoeur for their insights on several key points discussed in this essay.

[2] David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1984* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 76–99.

reforms liberalized state policies toward religion and contacts with overseas Cambodians began to open up. The 1992 to 1993 UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) period brought more money into the country, more political confusion, and more freedom for social experiment than had existed in the 1980s. In this climate, several millennial building projects sprang up, premised on the idea, expressed directly or indirectly, that the completion of a given building, fulfilling prophecy, would usher in a period of peace and great prosperity.[3] In an attempt to explore this general pattern, my paper will describe one such project, the series of *prasat*s ("temples," as in "temples of antiquity," derived from Sanskrit *prāsāda*, "palace, temple") being constructed in Kandal province, to the north of Phnom Penh, near the base of Phnom Prasidth, under the organization of a man in his early sixties named Ros Sarin. Like other such projects, it claims to establish a link to the Angkorean past as it opens up possibilities for a Cambodian future. Like many of the other projects, it ambiguously claims to draw authority from forest hermits while also claiming to overcome disorder and create civilization. Its interest lies, in part, in its self-consciousness about the process of constructing religious buildings: one of the temples built by Ros Sarin includes a series of murals depicting the process of its own construction. Here I will outline what is known about Ros Sarin and his project, explain how it relates to the general pattern of religious-building projects in Cambodia, describe in detail one of the *prasat*s, and, finally, discuss the meaning of constructing religious buildings in a Cambodian context. I postulate that such construction is, in a Cambodian (and Theravada Buddhist) context, a key way of realizing social organization (and moral order) in practice.

Ros Sarin and Phnom Prasidth

The hill Phnom Prasidth is the site of a seventh-century Cambodian shrine, and a variety of myths and cult activities have been associated with the hill since French colonial times. One myth maintains that there is a *naga* (mythical serpent) tunnel connecting Phnom Prasidth to Phnom Attarak, another spiritually powerful hill, visible in the distance from Phnom Prasidth, which is the site of many royal burial stupas. Ros Sarin claims that the site at the foot of the hill where his building projects are taking place is one of great antiquity and has had religious importance since the time of the Buddha.

Ros Sarin was born in Kampong Luong, a few kilometers from Phnom Prasidth; his biography (published by the project) says that he spent time in his youth as a hermit monk in the Ural mountains. He apparently began his building projects as a *krou khmaer*, or traditional healer, based in Phnom Penh. Since my first visits, hosts designated to meet guests at the different *prasat*s have described him as a civil servant with the Ministry of Interior; his own statements suggested that he had been with the ministry for some time. However, artisans who worked there later told me that the temple project is his primary occupation, and it was only through its success that he was able nominally to affiliate himself with the ministry. The ministry affiliation in turn bolstered the credibility of Ros Sarin and his project.

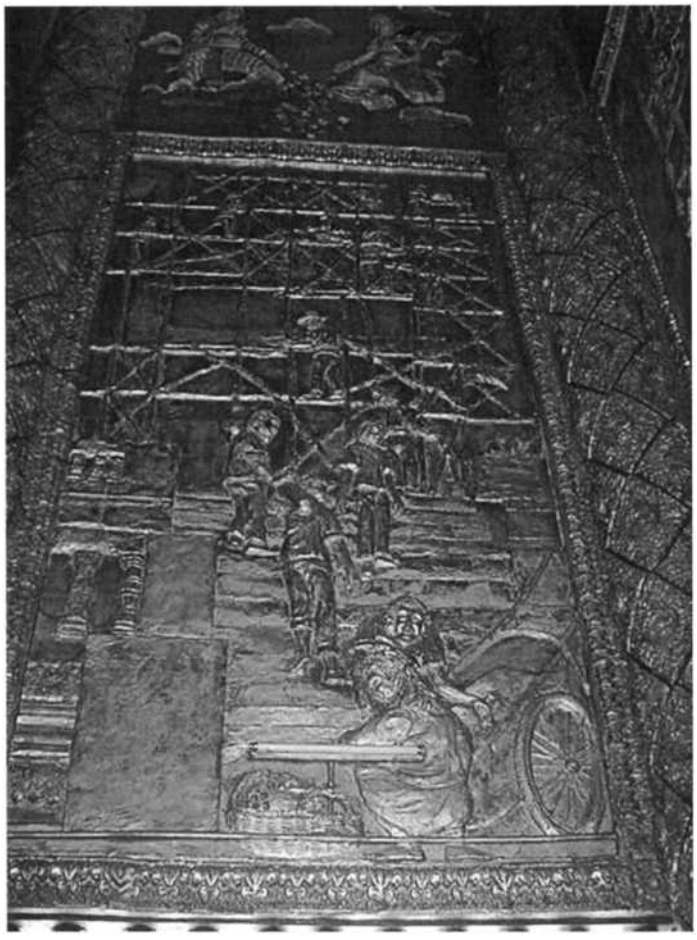
[3] Although millenarianism in the Christian tradition refers to the idea of cataclysmic change occurring at the time of the millennium, the term has been used by scholars of Southeast Asia to refer to similar movements built on prophecies of the ascension to an epoch of great, miraculous social well-being.

Prasat Vongkut Borei (Diamond Prasat)
(Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

The original constructions were on the grounds of a Thommayut *wat*, Wat Phnom Reap. From 1992 to 1993 Ros Sarin arranged to build two rather modest constructions on this site near the *wat*'s *preah vihear* (from Pali *vihara*, a high, box-like building with peaked, multi-layered roof). The two buildings are known as *prasat meas* and *prasat prak*, meaning a gold and silver temple. This construction was followed in 1994 to 1995 by a much more elaborate building within the walls of the same *wat* but at some distance from the *wat* buildings: it was in the shape of a cube with a multi-leveled, towered roof, and was known alternatively as the *prasat pech*, "diamond temple," or Prasat Vongkut Borei. This is the structure that includes the bas-reliefs depicting its own construction. When I first visited the site in 1997, the *prasat pech* had been completed and construction was in process for an elaborate concrete three-towered building in the Angkorean style, which was completed in 1998, called Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor. This has become the most popular building for visitors, who sometimes describe their journey to this site as a substitute for going to visit the original Angkor Wat, in Siem Reap.

After 1998, Ros Sarin moved his construction projects down the road, to the pre-1975 site of a Mahanikay temple, Wat Sovantomareach. He is now in the process of rebuilding this *wat* and has recruited a small community of monks to live there who follow his leadership, using a rather makeshift building temporarily as a *preah vihear*. He has completed a large reservoir and an impressive gate modeled on the entryways to Angkor Thom, which includes a long balustrade of *devas* and *asuras* (deities and demons) pulling a mythical serpent, or *naga*. There is also a large, solidly constructed dormitory for elderly visitors who want to stay for long periods of time and practice meditation. He has made significant progress on building a large

cruciform *sala* (meeting hall and ritual center) called the Sala Treythammasotthea, which draws heavily on Angkorean decoration but is also very Buddhist in orientation. Several *koti* (monks' dormitories) have been completed in recent years, as well as a school building for the monks, which is also in an elaborate Angkorean style.



Socialist realist-style bas-relief mural in the Diamond Prasat depicting temple under construction with scaffolding (Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

Themes and Parallel Movements

In comparison to similar religious-building projects I have investigated, Ros Sarin's can be deemed successful, both in terms of its scale and the length of time it has sustained itself as a movement. While it is still too early to claim to understand the broader picture of small religious movements in post-war Cambodia, it is clear that Ros Sarin's project shares iconographic and social momentum with several of the other more conspicuous movements in Kandal province, the area surrounding Phnom Penh, to the extent that they suggest reference to a common cultural schema,

in Sherry Ortner's terms.[4] While the movements all involve the construction of *prasat*s, they also coincide with a period of dramatic increase in the restoration and rebuilding of traditional *wat*s (some so elaborate that they also exhibit an aura of the mystical or millennial). The period since 1989 has also seen a flourishing of cults revolving around specific mediums or healers, and cults revolving around animals said to have spiritual properties. It is in general a period in which new religious projects have flourished. All of the movements have at different times faced local opposition, most have faced pressure from government authorities, and at least three such movements have been shut down.

Of the movements I am describing, only one in addition to Ros Sarin's project has really sustained itself over a long period. This is the project of Lok Ta Lnguong Ayuq Veng ("the Uneducated Old Man with Long Life"), an elderly man whose compound lies a few kilometers off the national highway running between Phnom Penh and Tonle Bati. The Lok Ta Lnguong Ayuq Veng movement is the one that most closely follows the classical pattern of millennial movements in Southeast Asia. Claiming to receive instructions from Indra, he has built five *prasat*s that will house the coming Persons of Merit (*neak mean bon*) who will in turn welcome Maitreya Buddha and usher in an era in which Cambodia will become an international power. One of the newer projects, a *prasat* on Highway 1 at Dey Et, is still going strong, but has had less time to prove its staying power.

Here I would like to discuss some of the themes that run through these buildings as a way of developing their importance for interpreting Ros Sarin's projects. These themes include the iconography of Angkor (and the idea of reestablishing an Angkorean tradition of building), the authority of religious ascetics, and the idea of *prasat meas prasat prak*.

Angkorean Imagery. Ros Sarin's constructions have parallels to another movement, centered around the figure of a self-styled *tapas*, or forest ascetic, who claims to have the ability to turn clay into stone, and who is generally known simply as Tapas.[5] Based in Kheang Svay, the district to the East of Phnom Penh on the road leading to the Nek Loeung ferry and Vietnam, Tapas was building a clay Angkorean *prasat*, which he claimed would turn to stone and usher in a new age. Tapas's construction, more rough-hewn than Ros Sarin's, gained momentum in the 1990s, following the period of the UN mission, but lost the public's interest in the 2000s. But it nevertheless reflects Ros Sarin's concern for affirming that contemporary Cambodians can build with the same greatness as the creators of Angkor.

A similarly neo-Angkorean *prasat* was built around 2000 in Dey Et, perhaps some twenty minutes farther down the national road from the temple-of-clay-turned-to-stone, on a spit of land accessible only by boat during the rainy season. An ethnographer who knew the builder prior to 2000 wrote this about him: "I think that this man is much involved in restoring peace and moral order in Cambodia, and I see the *prasat* linked with these ideas."[6] The builder, a medium, identifies himself directly with Vessantara, the immediate previous incarnation of the Buddha—which

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[4] Sherry Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[5] John Marston, "Clay into Stone: A Modern-Day Tapas," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 170–92.

[6] Didier Bertrand, personal communication, May 15, 2002.

in itself suggests the imminent coming of the Maitreya; some of his followers say he is Preah Bat Dhammik, the righteous world-saving king predicted in the prophetic text *Putth Tumneay* (see below). The *prasat* clearly invokes authority from its re-creation of an Angkorean style. The cruciform building was a strange bricolage of different Angkorean styles, crowned with four-faced towers like the Bayon of Angkor Thom. Its spiritual leader is an androgynous medium who receives the spirit of several mythical and historical Khmer kings, including a pair of iconic figures originally associated with famous, nearly identical Ankorean statues: the Leper King, Sdach Kamlong, and a female figure, Yiey Tep.[7]

Lok Ta Lnguong Ayuq Veng, mentioned above, is an exception to this pattern in that he has surprisingly few explicitly Angkorean images in his *prasat*s. However, like Ros Sarin, he has constructed an elaborate entranceway to his compound, with a bas-relief depicting the long chain of *asuras* and *devas* pulling the *naga* in the process of churning the sea of milk, one of the most famous images of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat.

The Vision of the Ascetic. Various projects also link thematically in that they draw on the idea of a building project guided by the spiritual power of a forest ascetic—the social agency of someone who is outside the material considerations of power, yet who, for that reason, can maintain great purity.

The *tapas* figure in Kheang Svay district who claims the capacity to turn clay into stone is the clearest example of this type. He alleges to have gained his powers in forest meditation, and for several years he consciously wore cloth printed in tiger-skin patterns, almost deliberately embracing the public's stereotype of an ascetic rather than displaying the practical characteristics that a real ascetic would assume.

The idea of the spiritual authority of a mysterious forest ascetic who directs a building project also informed the recent construction of a temple at Phnom Attarak, a historically significant hill a few kilometers north of Phnom Prasidth that is covered with the stupas of Cambodian kings. Since it was built on a historical site without the permission of government authorities, this structure was already scheduled to be destroyed when I visited in 2000, and is no longer standing. I never met the leader of this movement. A friend who had met him described him as a hermit. But the representations of him in murals and statues on the grounds of the compound showed him wearing a white, high-collared shirt, more the costume of royalty than of a hermit. Simple concrete statues on the site of the compound, however, showed this same figure communicating with more traditional icons of hermits in tiger skins. One visitor to the compound said that the ascetics there claimed they were *neak mean bon* (persons possessing merit—see below).

In the south of Khieng Svay district, near S'ang district, the construction of Wat Tuol Prasat Pram (the *wat* of the hillock of five *prasat*s) was originally being directed by a retired government official who claimed to receive instruction from the spirit of a forest ascetic, called Ta Eysey Sok Sar ("the white-haired hermit"), who is represented in a statue housed in a small building near the *wat* proper.

Lok Ta Lnguong Ayuq Veng does not make explicit use of the forest ascetic imagery, but its central figure, an elderly married man, plays on the humbleness of

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[7] See both essays in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia:* Didier Bertrand, "A Medium Possession Practice and Its Relationship with Cambodian Buddhism: The Grū Pāramī," pp. 150–69; and Hang Chan Sophea, "Sdach Kamlong and Yiey Tep: Worshipping Kings and Queens in Cambodia Today," pp. 113–26. See also Sokhieng Au's "The King with Hansen's Disease" in this collection.

his background, the simplicity of his lifestyle as a rice farmer, and the fact, as his name suggests, that he is "stupid, uneducated." The implication of these devices is that, despite appearances, he knows more than those who claim to be sophisticated. Like an ascetic, he is characterized by a simple, pure lifestyle.

On my first visit to Prasat Pech, an elderly, rather eccentric woman told me that Ros Sarin received his building instructions from a *neak sacchang*, or "person of truth." She described him as a forest ascetic from the Ural Mountains with the capacity to transport himself to Phnom Prasidth, who makes himself visible only to Ros Sarin, who had been his student.[8] While the term "*neak sacchang*" refers to a real person, the *neak sacchang* associated with Ros Sarin's site is apparently a spirit or force (*boramey*) of some kind. Among other things, it is the *neak sacchang* that determines the dates for the beginning and end of construction on the different buildings. Talking to middle-class representatives of the project on subsequent visits, I had the impression that this was not a narrative Ros Sarin wanted publicly associated with the site. In 2000 he himself dismissed it to me as "the superstitious beliefs of my followers." Nevertheless, artisans who had worked on his project confirmed that this was a part of the belief system of those closely involved in the movement.

Whether because I had achieved a great level of trust or because the movement had decided to make public use of this narrative, in early 2002, after a long interview with Sarin, I was brought upstairs in a building used for offices and shown the shrine to Ros Sarin's teacher (*krou*), the *neak sacchang*. (I was told that only people who come repeatedly to visit Ros Sarin are allowed to enter this place.) The shrine was a traditional, stepped altar on which images of the Buddha were placed. What made the room immediately striking was the fact that six oversized plush tigers stood as though on guard on either side of the area in front of the altar. There were also artificial orange trees, and the women guiding me pointed out with amusement that there were plastic monkeys and snakes in the trees. When I finally left the room, an elderly woman said to me, "You have had one visit to the forest" (*lok ban coul chhoue priy mdong*). Behind the stepped altar was a bed with a pillow covered with gold cloth. Ros Sarin's assistant said that only Ros Sarin can see his *krou* but other people can hear him. When the *krou* comes, they find the bedding in disorder in the area behind the altar.

***The Gold and Silver* Prasat.** A third salient theme, in addition to the recreation of Angkor and the guidance of the forest ascetic, is the importance of building a temple of gold and a temple of silver, *prasat meas prasat prak*. The retired civil servant who claimed to be inspired by the spirit of a forest ascetic at Wat Prasat Pram had earlier been involved in the building of these two *prasat* at another temple, Wat Svay Botumdin, a few kilometers north of Wat Tuol Prasat Pram, a location that he and a

[8] Ang Chouléan explains the *neak sacchang* in these terms: one acquires magical powers by assuming the different perfections associated with the Buddha. One of these perfections is telling the truth, and the *neak sacchang* is someone who has reached this perfection and thus acquired a special power. The person leaves human society to achieve this perfection, which is why the *neak sacchang* is, in effect, a forest ascetic. See Ang Chouléan, "Recherches Recentes sur le culte des Megalithes et des Grottes au Cambodge," *Journal Asiatique* 281,1–2 (1993): 185–210. The biography of Daran Kravanh includes an anecdote about being tattooed by a *neak sacchang* in his youth. See Lafreniere Bree, *Music through the Dark: A Tale of Survival in Cambodia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), p. 18.

group of affiliated monks were apparently forced to leave when a controversy subsequently developed.

In 1988, Kandal province's Ministry of Religion officials told me about a cult surrounding another *prasat meas prasat prak* that had been built in S'ang district, which had been shut down when government officials determined that its leader was perpetrating a financial scam. On a 1999 visit to a famous Wat Samraong Andeth in the suburbs of Phnom Penh, famous for its meditation school and headed by a charismatic, spiritually "powerful" abbot with a particularly strong following, I was surprised to discover a *prasat meas* and *prasat prak* facing each other in the front of the platform surrounding the newly constructed *preah vihear* of the *wat*.

The most famous construction of a *prasat meas prasat prak* occurred in 1998 on a small, man-made island in the Mekong River in front of the Royal Palace. According to prophecy, it was precisely at this place where *prasat meas* and *prasat prak* would appear. Five *prasats*—a gold, silver, and diamond *prasat*, and *prasats* to the legendary figures Preah Ko and Preah Keov[9]—were built, and the collection of buildings was given the name Wat Koh.[10] The *wat* on the island in the Mekong had to be torn down when government officials determined that the newly formed island was seriously interrupting the natural flow of water, whereby at the height of the flooding season water backed up into the Tonle Sap River. The island consequently had to be dredged to prevent ecological disaster.

As we have seen, Ros Sarin drew on this motif as he began his constructions. As at Wat Koh, he followed the building of gold and silver temples with the construction of a *prasat pech*—a diamond temple. I discuss the possible interpretation of these gold, silver, and diamond temples below.

None of those projects described above is identical, and none perfectly realizes all the same elements—but a general pattern is suggested whereby contact with an ascetic (generally associated with the forest) leads to the decision to build a *prasat* or a series of *prasats*. These *prasats* typically represent a link to Angkor and typically include a *prasat* of gold and a *prasat* of silver.

I will suggest that the way Cambodians have responded to mobilize public support around religious-building projects has deep roots in Southeast Asian Buddhist traditions. Following Chandler's analysis in "Songs," I postulate that a narrative of building/constructing, and schema surrounding such creative acts, is a culturally resonant narrative of establishing order in the face of the moral chaos and humiliation represented by the Pol Pot period and its aftermath, including the confusion generated by political changes at the time of the UN-sponsored elections.

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[9] The legend of Preah Ko and Preah Keov tells of a spiritually powerful bull and jewel (the jewel ambiguously a human figure) that were stolen by Siam in the Middle Period, i.e., the period in which the Khmer empire became weaker than Siam. The story has a prophetic element in that it suggests that the return of Preah Ko and Preah Keov to Cambodia will coincide with the country's return to greatness. As far as I know there is no Preah Ko/Preah Keov imagery at Ros Sarin's site. However, it is not unusual to find this imagery at the kind of religious-building projects I am describing, such as at Wat Svay Botumdin and Phnom Attarak.

[10] Chea Sotheacheath, "Rising Rivers Threaten Island *Wat*," *Phnom Penh Post* 8,16 (August 6–19, 1999): 1, 16.

Most, if not all, of these projects draw heavily on funds from overseas Khmer, and the wild eccentricity of some of these projects relates to a loosening of government regulations over religion at the time of UNTAC—elements extraneous to the schema in and of itself but related to the fact that the schema happens to be realized at this time and place.

THE PROJECT AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

The exact social composition of the movement at Phnom Prasidth is not clear. The movement is headed by Ros Sarin and Sovanna Kunthia, a woman in her late twenties who says Ros Sarin healed her as a child and she has followed him ever since. A Cambodian magazine article describes her as "the vice-president of the committee for *prasat* construction."[11] She is more of a spokesperson for the movement than is Ros Sarin, and will sometimes coach him while he is being interviewed. Some observers have concluded that they are man and wife. On one occasion, however, she was quick to correct me when I addressed her using a term of address for a married woman. The two have an air of familiarity with each other, and she demonstrates a proprietorial attitude toward Ros Sarin and the movement (as in her readiness to correct him when he is talking to other people) that suggests something other than simple discipleship. She is apparently in charge of the finances and much of the project's day-to-day management. She has visited California to raise funds, and enjoys showing pictures of that visit, including photographs of a US military base where a Khmer-American follower of the movement is employed. She said in 2002 that she had recently started teaching classical dance and the style of theater called *lkhaon bassac* at the site to a troupe that included a group of "orphan girls" brought there to perform together with youth from neighboring villages. (The orphans turned out to be four or five young, parentless women between seventeen and twenty years old.)

At the time of my early 2002 visit, Ros Sarin was accompanied by a young man who, judging by his dress, build, and manners, was probably a trained bodyguard (according to the Cambodian friend who accompanied me)—an indication both of Ros Sarin's wealth and the precariousness of his position.

It is hard to say exactly who Ros Sarin's core followers are. At least one of them, an elderly albino woman responsible for receiving visitors at Prasat Pech, is permanently resident at the site. There is a larger group of followers—in 1999 I was told there were twenty of them—who come to the site to receive visitors on a regular basis but do not stay overnight. These are, in general, well-dressed, middle-aged to elderly women (and a smaller number of men) of the sort one would expect to see playing conspicuous roles in the ceremonial activities of an urban *wat*, although they claim to come not just from Phnom Penh but from various provinces. One of these women described herself as a retired primary schoolteacher, living in Phnom Penh, who, prior to 1975, had been trained as a teacher at one of the national pedagogical schools in Kampong Kantuat, Kandal province. In general, Ros Sarin's followers seem to be of predominantly middle-class backgrounds, whereas the followers of Tapas or Lok Ta Lnguong Ayuq Veng have tended to be from a lower class and uneducated.

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[11] Tara, "Watt Bhnam Rap koet ryan ktau?" *Prajapriy: The Popular Magazine* 4,196 (February 21–28, 2002): 44–45.

Apparently there have been conflicts within the movement, and tensions with the project's neighbors. The movement's literature refers to "obstacles" involving the new building at the Mahanikay site. ("Master Ros Sarin is striving to build a new *wat* called Wat Sowannathammreach, but finds himself facing obstacles, what may be called *mea* [literally, Mara, the enemy of the Buddha] coming to defeat him in every way."[12]) A Cambodian magazine article described financial disputes between Ros Sarin's organization and Wat Phnom Reap, and suggested that this lay behind the decision to begin projects at a new site.[13] The movement's booklet reads as though it is answering charges, describing various ways it has contributed financially to Wat Phnom Reap (albeit a sum considerably less than what the booklet reports was being spent on the *prasat*s themselves). Ros Sarin commented to me that the monks at Wat Phnom Reap are interested in the modern (*samey*), while this new *wat* will be more concerned with the ancient (*boran*).[14] Monks at Wat Phnom Reap seemed noticeably disengaged from the activities of the *prasat*s, and Ros Sarin did not seem to want to encourage contact between visitors and monks at the new *wat*. A sign of village support is indicated, however, by the fact that, according to one villager, young monks are now more likely to be ordained at the new Mahanikay *wat*, where Ros Sarin's current building is concentrated, than at Wat Phnom Reap.

Ros Sarin has also received support on a more national and translocal scale. Princess Bopha Devi, the minister of culture, appeared at the ribbon-cutting ceremony of Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor. Ros Sarin acknowledges having received donations from the king, Sihanouk, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, but says that they are not major donors. Nevertheless, a level of popular (mis)perception may be revealed by the fact that a monk at a rural *wat* in Kampong Cham province, who had visited Phnom Reap, was firmly convinced that Sihanouk had built the whole project—perhaps confusing it with the mammoth stupa Sihanouk is building at Phnom Attarak. Definitely, a large percentage of the funding has come from overseas Khmer.

Ros Sarin and Sovanna Kunthia say that the site is designed to have something for everyone—a statement repeated in the project's booklet. Large statues of monkeys and a pineapple, they say, are designed for the young who will visit as a diversion and take pictures. For other visitors, there are places for meditation. I heard a guide use the elevated term *ti monorom*, "place for pleasurable activities," and perhaps that description is appropriate to describe a "tourist" destination that also has overtones of the otherworldly.

Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor does, indeed, attract many visitors, including young people and families with children. Visiting there is described by many Cambodian visitors as similar to visiting Angkor Wat. One Khmer-American couple from Minnesota, for instance, brought their relatives from Kampong Cham to visit. Showing me the pictures in their photo album, this couple recalled how excited their relatives had been. The relatives were *so* glad to have been taken there, because otherwise they would never have seen such a thing in their life.

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[12] In the English pages of the booklet, this is stated as, "However, the master is meeting with an obstacle, the disruptive people."

[13] Tara, "Watt Bhnam Rap koet ryan ktau?," pp. 44–45.

[14] I discuss this *boran/samey* distinction in: John Marston, "The Reconstrucción del Budismo 'Antiguo' de Camboya," *Estudios de Asia y África* 37,2 (2002): 271–303.

One cannot avoid the topic of whether Ros Sarin is pocketing money donated to the project, or whether the project in other ways involves misappropriation of funds. Cambodians themselves discuss such questions, and that issue is part of the discourse surrounding the project. A magazine journalist, for example, writes:

> The building of the [most recent] *prasat*, as Ros Sarin acknowledges, has been hurt by a great deal of criticism from a number of circles of people who do not value the building project, with the accusation that the construction is for Ros Sarin's personal benefit [*leapsakkara*]. This, therefore, resulted in a decline in contributions, the money necessary for construction, which has meant progress in construction has been slow.[15]

However grand the diamond pagoda and Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor are, I myself found it difficult to believe that they cost over one million and two million dollars, respectively, as their literature claims. This may mean that part of the money contributed has, indeed, been pocketed by Ros Sarin. It is also likely that the dollar amounts given for the construction of the *prasat*s is exaggerated, perhaps out of a logic that sees the *prasat*s as more important if they cost extravagant sums to build. It is like saying that the *prasat*s are *worth* one or two million dollars, which is to say, in Cambodian terms, unfathomably great sums.

While one Cambodian observer claimed to know that a large percentage of the donations from the United States had been organized by a single person, I have not been able to verify this among Cambodians in the United States. Sovanna Kunthia dismissed this idea, saying that their US donations came from many small contributions—ignoring the fact that there are not enough Cambodians in the United States to raise millions of dollars in this way. The mysteries around how the project is funded perhaps feed the speculation that some great (and possibly prophetically important) figure, such as Sihanouk, may be actually funding it.

THE BUILDING PROJECT AND ITS MEANINGS

Before going on to look at Ros Sarin's explanation of the sequence of the buildings' actual construction and other possible interpretations that can be given to the project, I will describe the four building projects in more detail.

Prasat Meas Prasat Prak. The gold and silver *prasat*s (the project booklet's English sections use the word "pagodas") were the first of Ros Sarin's constructions and remain the least conspicuous. As opposed to the diamond *prasat* and Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor, which are within the temple grounds of Wat Phnom Reap, but lie across a field and seem separate from it, the gold- and silver-painted *prasat*s are definitely within the ambit of the *wat* itself, behind and off to one side of the central *preah vihear*. According to the project's literature, the gold *prasat* is 13 by 12 meters, with a height of 11 meters, and the silver *prasat* is 12 by 11 meters, with a height of 11 meters. That is, they are the same height, but the silver *prasat* is slightly smaller than the gold one. Both are closed on three sides and open on the side facing the east. Steps and short *naga* balustrades lead up to the front of each *prasat*. Inside each is a

[15] Tara, "Bhab camlaek nau watt thmi chmoh Sovannadhammaraj," *Prajapriy: The Popular Magazine* 4,196 (February 21–28, 2002): 16–17, translation mine; single word in brackets is from the original.

stepped altar, painted either the corresponding gold or silver. The gold *prasat*, which as we will see is meant to be associated with masculinity, or the father, has a seated Buddha as its central image (and a smaller figure of the earth goddess Neang Konhin standing conspicuously in front of it, at the very front of the *prasat*). The shrine of the silver *prasat* centers around two standing female figures draped in silver robes with pink sashes, with silver-painted artificial trees on the altar before them. The figures may be meant to represent Siem Reap's famous paired statue of Neang Ceik and Neang Cum, in which case the female figures should also be seen as Buddha figures. According to the project's literature, the two *prasat*s were built at a cost of US$35,627.

Prasat Meas Prasat Prak (Gold and Silver *Prasats*)
(Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

Prasat Vongkut Borei. The diamond *prasat* is also called Prasat Vongkut Borei. Compared to the *prasat meas prasat prak*, it represents a step toward the monumental. Architecturally, it was a fairly simple project and could have been built with the same techniques that are used to build a traditional *preah vihear*. Like a *preah vihear*, it is basically a rectangular box, although it is closer to a cube than a *preah vihear* is, and the multi-layered roof, rather than extending over the sides of the building, supported by columns, is more squarely settled on the box structure. At the very center of the roof is a tower, and there are smaller towers on the four corners of the roof. In an interview with me, Ros Sarin sometimes called it the *prasat* of the five towers (*prasat kampul pram*). According to the project's information booklet, it has a length of almost 50 meters, a width of about 45.5 meters, and a height of 27 meters. Part of what makes this structure striking is the image in the center of each of the

four sides and, in particular, around the large front doors of the temple, of Reahu eating the moon, which serves to anthropomorphize the building. The building is also striking because of its rich orange color and the way it is situated on the top of three balustrated levels of land. There is a pond on either side of the walkway leading up to the temple on the middle level. According to information provided by the project, the building cost US$1,238,677.

Door of Prasat Vongkut Borei (Diamond Prasat)
(Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

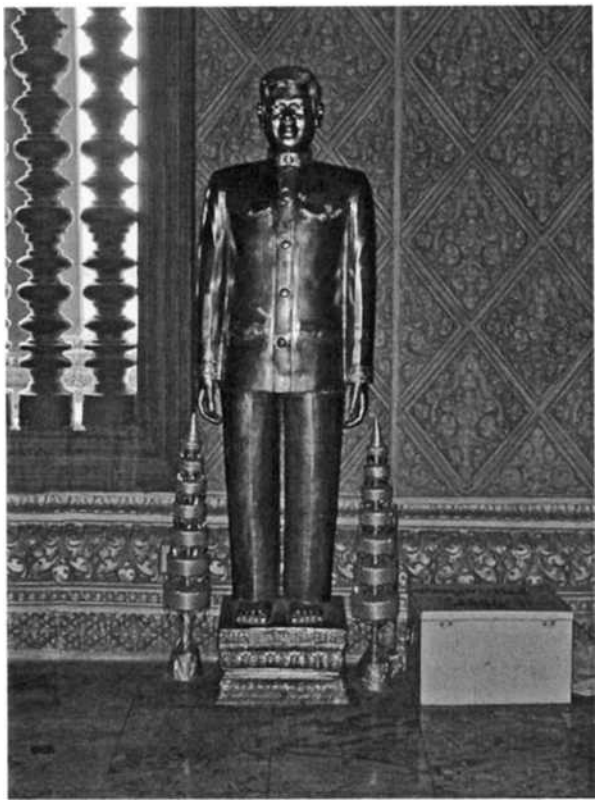
The inside of the *prasat*, again, resembles the inside of a *preah vihear*, except that it is closer to being square. As in a *preah vihear*, an altar with a large Buddha image faces the entrance of the *prasat*, to the east. Here, however, on the wall behind the Buddha, and extending onto the ceiling, is a painting of a huge Bodhi tree with overarching branches. To the right of the base of the Buddha image is a statue of Ros Sarin seated, reading palm-leaf manuscripts. As one sometimes finds in the wealthiest Cambodian *wats*, there are also glass cabinets containing Buddhist scriptures.

On the upper walls of the other three sides of the room are a series of fifteen bas-reliefs, which Ros Sarin commissioned from artists affiliated with the Phnom Penh School of Fine Arts. They depict the various stages of the construction of the building, from raising money to communal construction to a community celebration of its completion.

Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor. More than any of the other *prasats*, Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor, known informally as the *prasat* of the three towers, is what attracts

visitors and has made the site famous. Very much built in an Angkorean style, the building could be described as a long, elevated hall crowned by three towers, made of cement and painted brown to resemble Angkorean sandstone. The long hall is crossed by three shorter building extensions at the points of the three towers. The roof extends in an arch out from the building, supported by a colonnade surrounding the entire building. Bas-reliefs on the outside of the building depict stories from the Ramayana and Buddhist narratives and, in an echo of the bas-reliefs in the earlier building, there are two or three bas-reliefs that depict workers in modern dress in the process of constructing the building itself. Nearly the entire surface of the building is embossed with Angkorean floral design, where there are not bas-reliefs.

The long, narrow interior is divided into two areas. Visitors enter a doorway under the left tower farthest to the south, from where they can pass into a room with an altar to a central Buddha figure. The rest of the interior is a long, marble-floored, rectangular room. On the walls is a series of bas-reliefs on two levels. The lower level depicts the life of the Buddha; the higher level consists of what could best be described as coats-of-arms configurations, each with a pair of animals (elephants, tigers, snakes) holding up some particular object (a globe, Buddhist scriptures, flags, umbrellas). The room houses a series of concrete statues, most of Indian deities, but also, conspicuously, a representation of a Cambodian man and woman in modern (late twentieth-century) dress. There is also a bronze statue of Ros Sarin standing.



Statue of Ros Sarin (Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

According to the booklet, Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor is 56 meters in length, 42 meters in width, and 42 meters in height,[16] and cost US$2,073,175. The booklet says, "This is a *prasat* of three towers that has a structure full of Khmer ornament and design, the result of the handiwork of a Khmer 'ancestor' of the present era, teacher [*lok krou*] Ros Sarin, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to be preserved for the coming generations of Khmer."[17]

At the time Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor was built, Ros Sarin also built an elaborate temple gate at the entrance to the road leading to Wat Phnom Reap, in the style of the four-faced temple gates of Angkor Thom. When construction began at the new *wat*, Wat Sovanna Thommareach, an even more elaborate four-faced gate was built, incorporating on either side of the road long balustrades of *devas* and *asuras* pulling *nagas*, again based on the model of the entrances to Angkor Thom. This gate and its balustrades were, until recently, the features that most attracted visitors to this *wat*.

Head of *asura* in balustrade by roadway leading to Wat Sovanna Thommareach (Photo by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

[16] These dimensions seem inaccurate.

[17] Translation mine; term in brackets is from the original. The booklet's English version states: "This temple was well designed by Mr. Ros Sarin, in this era, i.e., twentieth–twenty-first centuries, for the Khmer younger generation."

Sala Treythammasotthea. Ros Sarin began building the essential buildings of a *wat* at the same time that he was building its central *prasat*, Sala Treythammasotthea. From the beginning, a styrofoam model was available to give visitors a sense of what the *prasat* would look like. By summer 2004 the entire structure was completed, and most of it was covered with Angkorean decoration, while the inside of the building was still under construction. The *prasat* has a cruciform shape, which could be described as the intersection of two rectangular buildings with arched roofs, which is further complicated by the fact that the arched roofs are layered in three ascending levels. Ros Sarin and Sovanna Kunthia say that inside the large sala there will be twelve smaller *prasat*s at strategic points. A large Buddha image is already situated at the place of the central altar. According to an early magazine article, the building will be 72 meters by 56 meters, with a height of 20 meters.[18]

Sala Treythammasotthea
(Photos by Elizabeth Guthrie, with permission)

SELF-DESCRIPTIONS

Obviously, the "meaning" of the buildings is not simple, and different layers of meaning correspond to the different levels of involvement people have with the temple. At one level is the meaning the *prasat*s have for the many casual visitors (tourists) to the project. At another level is the meaning for what is probably a fairly small number of people involved in the cult of *neak sacchang*. Most of the Cambodians and Cambodian-Americans who have contributed money to the project probably fall somewhere in between: they enjoy the spectacle of the buildings, are

[18] Tara, "Bhab camlaek nau watt thmi chmoh Sovannadhammaraj," pp. 16–17.

attracted to the idea of recreating the greatness of Angkor, and are only vaguely aware that the movement has supernatural or prophetic underpinnings.

A booklet distributed by the project comments:

> Ros Sarin has never wanted material goods to take with him, he only thinks of one thing, of merit [*kosal phal bon*] and he wants our nation to prosper and move in the direction of high culture like other countries in the world, and he wants later generations of Khmer [*koun khmaer camnoen kraoy*] to know Cambodia's value, civilization, culture, and Buddhism, and to help raise up our Khmer civilization, culture, and Buddhism, so that they will be well-kept [*kung wung*], long-lasting [*thet the cerkal*], and increasing in splendor [*rung roeung*] in the future. Therefore, Master Ros Sarin is a Khmer forefather [*boppabaros*] performing the finest handiwork of a kind rarely found in this world. He is a true Khmer "ancestor" [*boppachon*] who can help to uplift the nation and can continue the legacy of the handiwork of the Khmer ancestors of Angkor.[19]

Ros Sarin's statements in interviews about what the different *prasat*s mean are perhaps not totally consistent and do not always clearly correspond to what seems to be the reality of the *prasat*s and the iconography they emphasize. It occurs to one that he may have arrived at ways of talking about what the temples mean *after* they had already been built. But these statements should be regarded as another level of "meaning" of the *prasat*s, at least as they are presented to the outside world.

Ros Sarin says that the gold *prasat* concerns paying back *(dap)* the debt (*kun*) to one's father and the silver *prasat* is about paying back the debt to one's mother. As noted earlier, the roof of the diamond pagoda has a central tower and four smaller towers on each corner. He said that the five towers represent the five buddhas—the four of the past and the Buddha Maitreya to come, and in a way can be said to represent the *kun* (generosity for which we are indebted) of the Buddha, in the same way that the *prasat meas prasat prak* represent the *kun* owed to the mother and father. (Note, however, that other than the five towers, there seems to be very little imagery of the five buddhas in the *prasat pech*). Gold is superior to silver, he said, and the diamond is superior to gold. In a previous interview, in 2000, Ros Sarin had stressed a different aspect of the *prasat*, saying that it was a site for the preservation of the writings of spiritual formulas (*kompii kbuen knaat*). That idea seems to relate to the statue of him reading palm-leaf manuscripts that is found in this *prasat*.

If the *prasat meas prasat prak* represent the *kun* of the parents and *prasat pech* represents the *kun* of the Buddha himself, Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor represents the *kun* of the nation (*cheat*) itself. It represents the civilization and the culture of the nation. In two different interviews, Ros Sarin said that the three towers represent the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The connection to nation was stated in slightly different terms in the two interviews. In 2000 he said that, in addition to representing the three jewels, the three towers stood for the slogan

[19] Translation mine; words in brackets are from the original. The booklet also provides a shorter, English version of this, which states: "He never wants to possess all these properties. What he wants is his good deeds and the prosperities of the nation and Civilization for the Khmer younger generations to understand the Value of the culture, Civilization, and Buddhism. Therefore, Master Ros Sarin is one of the Khmer ancestors that have done a lot of things for the upholding of the Khmer nation and he is also a Successor of Khmer Angkor ancestors."

"Nation, Religion, and King." Two years later he pointed to the fact that the middle tower had nine levels and the towers on the side had seven levels. Those of seven levels, he said, represent the spirit of the people *(reah)* through the country and the middle one represents the spirit of the nation—"because nation and religion oversee the people."

The *prasat* still being built now—as of early 2007—is a representation of Buddhism and a place for making merit. It is a place for sacrificial offerings (*sâkkar bauchea*).

Asked in 2002 about the relationship between Buddhist and Brahmanist elements at the site, Ros Sarin said that all of the building sites had both Buddhist and Brahmanist features. In general, he said, if there are only Buddhist elements, the building cannot generate significant progress (*chouen loeun tiw muk;* presumably, progress of the society as a whole). All religions lead people to do good. But you need Brahmanism, the same kind of Brahmanism you would use to wage wars, to *protect* Buddhism. The two elements work together. Each *prasat* has the image of the Buddha inside, he said, but outside there will be Brahmanist images.

A broader interpretation of what the temples "mean" must draw on what is known about iconography and its interpretation at the present time.

Gold, Silver, and Diamond *Prasats*

A central question is what the *prasat* of gold and *prasat* of silver mean, and why they figure in so many religious-building projects. Clearly there are several layers of meaning operating simultaneously, and one of them, as Ros Sarin points out, is the association of these temples with the figure of the father and mother. In addition to providing a place for offerings that will repay the father and the mother's *kun*, meditation on the figures of the father and mother is, according to one informant, a technique in traditional Khmer insight meditation—and the shrines provide a place for that meditation. (It should be pointed out, however, that other *prasat meas prasat prak* in Cambodia do not have a clear association with male and female or with the mother and the father.)

When asked why Ros Sarin might build gold, silver, and diamond *prasat*s, one rural Cambodian monk, with a reputation for special spiritual powers, replied that these were the colors of the Buddha's bones after cremation. (When asked about this, Ros Sarin said that, in fact, the bones of the Buddha had been of seven colors.)

One level of meaning that the gold, silver, and diamond *prasat*s have, which may seem crass (particularly to Westerners), is simply that they represent wealth. Thus people make offerings to temples of precious metals because they hope that in so doing they will achieve wealth themselves. This perhaps has something to do with the fact that so many of Ros Sarin's followers are middle-class people—people taking risks to make a living (*rok si*). While this interpretation jars with a conception of spiritual purity that sees spirituality as removed from all reference to material considerations, such a view is consistent with the ways many spiritually powerful monks and cult leaders are "used" by the population in actual practice. In this respect I should note that when casinos were built during the Sihanouk period, they were referred to by the population as *prasat meas prasat prak.* (However, this seems to be an ironical reference to a more traditional use of the term.)

Perhaps the most intriguing interpretation of the gold and silver *prasat*s is that they are related to traditional prophecies. An article in the *Phnom Penh Post* about the

building project on the island in front of the palace stated that the construction of the *prasat meas prasat prak* related to a statement in the traditional Khmer prophetic text, the *Putth Tumneay*, that peace would come after a *prasat meas* and *prasat prak* were built in front of the palace. "*Put Tumneay* [*Putth Tumneay*] said Cambodia will be having a long time of war, but the war will be completely finished while the *Prasat Meas* and *Prasat Prak* [golden and silver temples] emerge from the four crossed rivers," the article quoted a monk resident at the site as saying.[20]

The *Putth Tumneay* describes, in metaphorical terms, various crises the country will go through before finally reaching a millennial peace, through the agency of a king, Preah Bat Dhammik, a boddhisattva who will be discovered in the humble role of a monk.[21] The specific association of peace with the construction of gold and silver *prasat*s does not appear in any written version of the *Putth Tumneay* I have seen or in any that Ledgerwood and Hansen found in their research on the *Putth Tumneay*, but there are clearly numerous different versions (written and oral) of the *Putth Tumneay*. We know from verbal testimony, such as that quoted in the *Phnom Penh Post* article, that the idea of a temple of gold and a temple of silver figures in some of them. Ledgerwood points out that one of the printed versions of the *Putth Tumneay* shows two *prasat* in its cover illustration.[22] Leng Lim, a Cambodian-American man well-versed in these prophecies, gave me the following version of the sequence of events in an interview.

> The idea of *prasat meas prasat prak* comes from a reference to the *Putth Tumneay*. One version of the *Putth Tumneay* holds that before Preah Bat Dhammik [the Righteous Ruler] comes, *prasat*s will *poh*—appear suddenly of their own accord—out of the ground at the four faces of the river [that is, the place in Phnom Penh where the Mekong, Bassac, and Tonle Sap rivers form an X. One is gold and one is silver. The prophecy tells a little about what is inside the *prasat*s: *trop sambat* [belongings of value] of precious stones and metals. The *prasat*s come for Preah Bat Dhammik. After they appear there will be a war with fighting for control of the *prasat*s, and many people will be killed, with blood becoming a river.[23]

Leng Lim's narrative goes on to tell of a Chinese Preah Pisnuka figure (Khmer name for the Indian deity Visvakarman) who searches for Preah Bat Dhammik and eventually finds him.

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[20] Chea Sotheacheath, "Rising Rivers Threaten Island Wat," *Phnom Penh Post* (August 6–19, 1999): 1, 16.

[21] See Frank Smith, *Interpretive Accounts of the Khmer Rouge Years: Personal Experiences in Cambodian Peasant World View*, Occasional Paper No. 18 (Madison, WI: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989); and Olivier de Bernon, "La Prédiction du Bouddha," *Aséanie* 1 (1998): 43–66. Hansen suggests that, in the nineteenth century, when versions of the *Putth Tumneay* emerged, "the act of interpreting the texts ... was an effort to ameliorate present anxiety and dissatisfaction through establishing moral causation and effect in the past and the future." Anne Hansen, "Khmer Identity and Theravada Buddhism," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, pp. 40–62. Heng Monychenda's book *Preahbat Dhammik* (Anlongvil/Phnom Penh: Buddhism for Development, 1999) makes reference to the prophecies, but is more concerned with the concept of the *Dhammaraja* in relation to the theory of political leadership.

[22] Personal communication.

[23] Field notes for interview with Leng Lim, June 14, 2002.

Asked in 2000 whether *prasat meas prasat prak* relate to the *Putth Tumneay*, Ros Sarin replied that his *entire* building scheme relates deeply to the *Putth Tumneay*, but did not elaborate. In 2002, pressed on the degree to which his movement parallels that of Lok Ta Lnguong, who specifically claims his building project is intended to welcome the coming of persons of merit, Ros Sarin denied that he was doing that—but at the same time showed an obvious familiarity with the ins and outs of the *Putth Tumneay*.

Since the Buddha-of-the-future, Maitreya, who is associated with the coming of millennial peace and prosperity, is linked iconographically with the image of the tiger,[24] it is worth noting that tiger images are salient at Ros Sarin's site: in statuary in front of the *prasat pech* as well as in the *neak sacchang* shrine room. Ros Sarin's configuration on the top of *prasat pech*—a central tower surrounded by four smaller towers, which he describes as representing the five buddhas of the present era—is similar to middle-period configurations described by Ashley Thompson in which the central tower represents Maitreya. This configuration suggests, iconographically, that the *prasat* may be intended to evoke the idea of the coming of the Buddha-of-the-future.

THE STORY OF NANDIYA

One of the most resonant explanations for why Cambodians are concerned with building *prasat*s was given to me by a former monk. He referred to a story that he said was in the *Dhammapada*. (It comes from the commentary on the *Dhammapada*, the *Dhammapada-Atthaka*.)

Here I give his version of the story (based on the field notes of my interview in Khmer) and include as Appendix A a published translation of the Pali story.

> It is about a good man whose name was layman Nandiya [*Nontoyeaqubasok*] who lived at the time of the Buddha. At the time the Buddha was spending time in the Isipatanamiktawan forest—one believed to be a place where hermits meditated. Layman Nandiya went to worship the Buddha there, and after the death of his parents, he became a prominent donor to the Buddha, and his gifts were made with great purity of will. He built a large *sala*, which was four room-lengths [*lveng*] and had one corniced roof, for the followers of the Buddha. When he donated the *sala*, he poured water onto the palm of the Buddha's hand. By the power of this act, a *prasat* in the form of a jewel of seven colors appeared in the heavens, along with many female *apsaras* flying around to take care of it.
>
> One of the Buddha's closest disciples, Preah Mukalean, flew to heaven, and came to the place of the *prasat*. He asked the *apsaras* to whom did the *prasat* belong, and they replied that it belonged to layman Nandiya, and that he was still living. They asked that, when Preah Mukalean returned to earth, he should encourage layman Nandiya to go to the place of the *prasat*. When Preah Mukalean returned to earth, he asked the Buddha why there would be a *prasat* for someone who was still living taken care of by *apsaras*. The Buddha told him that the *apsaras* were there because they were friends of layman Nandiya, and the *prasat* resulted from

[24] Ashley Thompson, "The Future of Cambodia's Past: A Middle Cambodian Maitreya Cult," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, pp. 13–39.

the fact that he made a *sala* to give to the Sangha. When layman Nandiya died, he was reborn in heaven with the *prasat* already made.

These stories have been a major text for monastic education in Cambodia. The oral version is in large part consistent with a standard translated version by Burlingame (see Appendix A), with the exceptions that what is translated as "celestial nymphs" appears as "*apsaras*" and what is translated as "mansion" appears as "*prasat*." In Cambodia, both words are heavily tinged with reference to Angkor. In both the ex-monk's version and the Pali translation, the building constructed on earth was a religious one for the use of monks, but not a *prasat*. But looking at the religious-building projects, such as Ros Sarin's, through the lens of the Nandiya story casts them in an interesting light. It reminds us, first of all, of the incredible font of merit that can be earned by the construction of a religious building. More than that, it suggests that an earthly building can link to the appearance of an otherworldly one, as though creating a bridge between the two worlds.

THE BAS-RELIEF NARRATIVE OF BUILDING

The site where the construction itself most clearly contains a narrative of building is in a series of bas-reliefs in Prasat Pech. As another Western scholar who visited the site pointed out to me, they are an odd combination of Buddhism and socialist realism. The narrative they depict begins with the process of fund-raising, showing village fund-raising activities where, as is common at a festival in a Cambodian *wat*, members of the community make donations that are announced publicly over a microphone. The bas-reliefs go on to depict the actual building of the *prasat*. They unabashedly glorify labor and the ideal of communal efforts. They depict modern types of construction, showing cranes and pulleys and trucks. The particular socialist–realist style may in part reflect the training and experience of the artists, but it remains clear that Ros Sarin wanted to document a building process carried out by modern Cambodians. In the largest bas-relief, immediately above the large east entrance to the *prasat* (and directly facing the Buddha image), is a scene of villagers celebrating the completion of the *prasat* in the area in front of it. Much more than any of the other interpretations, this bas-relief suggests a communal vision of the meaning of the building of the *prasat*.

Artisans who worked on Prasat Nokor Vimean Suor say that Prasat Pech *did* involve a great deal of community labor, although on later projects Ros Sarin was more likely to hire skilled craftsmen. Nevertheless, the "realism" depicted is an idealized one, consistent with a folk conception of how money would be raised and communal efforts rallied in the construction of a traditional Cambodian *wat*. One does not see here, for example, any depiction of the relation of local people to supporters from Phnom Penh, or support from overseas Khmer communities. Instead, one sees a conception of a unified Khmer community working in solidarity toward a common goal.

It perhaps goes without saying that among Angkorean bas-reliefs there is no equivalent depiction of workers in the process of building the monuments. However, in Phnom Penh, at the present time (2007), one will sometimes see paintings in public places that show the Angkorean monuments in the process of construction. (I have always assumed that these paintings are modeled on *National Geographic* illustrations, for they resemble them closely.)

MILLENNIALISM AND RELIGIOUS-BUILDING PROJECTS IN THE THERAVADA CONTEXT

While much has been written about religious-building projects in Southeast Asia and about Southeast Asian millennialism, I have not found incidences in the literature where such building projects occur in conjunction with millennialism. While I conclude that Ros Sarin's project is millennial, based in part on the parallels it has with other Cambodian movements that are more openly so, readers should keep in mind that the site cultivates a more innocuous public image of diversion and cultural heritage. Not everyone who has written about millennialism would characterize the project as millennial.

Charles Keyes shows convincingly a pattern whereby millennial movements occur at times of "crisis centering around political power"[25]—apt to the context of Cambodia, where the religious-building projects I am discussing have arisen at the time of transition following UN-sponsored elections. Keyes also explores the specific forms that millennialism is likely to take in Theravada Buddhist societies, and how it focuses around the idea of the Maitreya and around the idea of "persons with merit"—persons with such intensity of merit that they are in a position to transform their society.[26] Keyes sees millennial movements as occurring during moments of stress, as a society passes from one stable political form to another.

> I would insist that, by its very nature, millennialism can never itself be religious change; rather, millennialism as a religion is invariably a transitory phenomenon. Having said this, we cannot, however, simply dismiss millennialism as a pathological aberration. Millennialism is a symptom of profound social crisis that must be resolved if a society is to persist.[27]

Here Keyes is departing, for example, from the earlier work of Anthony Wallace who included millennial movements in the larger category of what he called "revitalization movements." While, like Keyes, Wallace saw revitalization movements as occurring when a society was in transition from one "steady state" to another, he recognized the possibility that they might constitute a process of social transformation that would lead to the creation of a new gestalt. Wallace observed:

> With a few exceptions, every religious revitalization movement with which I am acquainted has been originally conceived in one or several hallucinatory visions by a single individual. A supernatural being appears to the prophet-to-be, explains his own and his society's troubles as being entirely or partly a result of the violation of certain rules, and promises individual and social revitalization if the injunctions are followed and the rituals practiced, but personal and social catastrophe if they are not.[28]

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[25] Charles F. Keyes, "Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society," *Journal of Asian Studies* 36,2 (1977): 283–302.

[26] Kitisiri Malalgoda also explores the idea of how millennialism relates to Theravada doctrine. Kitsiri Malalgoda, "Millennialism in Relation to Buddhism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (1970): 424–41.

[27] Keyes, "Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society," p. 302.

[28] Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58,2 (1956): 264–80.

In Wallace's typology, some movements "profess to *revive* a traditional culture now fallen into desuetude," while others will import foreign systems or realize for the first time a utopian vision.

Stanley Tambiah's analysis fits the Cambodian building projects in that it sees millennialism as relating to positive processes that arise naturally to reconstitute social order. He is less concerned than Wallace or Keyes with the passage from one steady state to another, and describes processes that are ongoing in what he categorizes as the premodern "galactic polity." He writes:

> What is millennial Buddhism? It is a totality of beliefs, expectations, practices, and actions that have as their object the reconstitution of an existing social order in terms of an ideal order, a future utopia, which at the same time is a return to an ideal and positive beginning.[29]

While Tambiah does not tell us much about religious-building projects in relation to millennialism, he does shed light on the persistent pattern of social orders being formed by religious ascetics:

> Because these holy men have been credited with sacred powers, they have frequently been both the centers around whom cults and associations have formed and the leaders of different kinds of actions seeking to harmonize or transform the world. There is historical evidence to suggest that they might have been importantly implicated in the founding of kingdoms, settlements, and towns. The authors of chronicles frequently describe them as agents in the spread and maintenance of Buddhism. In both these roles they are seen to work on behalf of the "civilizing" mission of state formation and the preservation of Buddhism. But there is a third role that is perhaps even more significant. Some of these holy men have been at the hearts of Buddhist cults and movements that have questioned, and even attacked, the established political and religious systems and their values while championing reformist and millenarian goals.[30]

Much has been written about the Theravadin concept of merit and how it relates to social organization. The literature has given much emphasis to how the Sangha and *wat*s serve as a field of merit as objects of donation.

While the idea that religious-building projects are a particularly significant font of merit has deep roots in Theravada Buddhism, it is typically associated with the building of stupas, *viharas*, or other traditional buildings of a *wat*. The literature has stressed these types of building projects as the acts of kings or other powerful persons. Michael Aung-Thwin, writing about the Burma of Pagan, associated religious-building projects with the concept of *phun*, or "glory," which was proof of possessing merit:

> The possession of *phun* among laymen could be demonstrated—indeed, *had* to be demonstrated—by acts of power, piety, and largesse. Kings therefore built the

[29] Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 319.

[30] Ibid., pp. 293–94.

> largest, most expensive temples—a statement of their spiritual status to be sure but also of their political rank.... The argument was, as in many other aspects of Burmese society, circular: one built the largest temple because one was spiritually superior, and one was spiritually superior because one built the largest temple.[31]

Aung-Thwin describes the generosity of Burmese kings toward religious institutions as one that stimulated economy and fostered social integration, while at the same time, since there were limits to how much the state could give and still sustain itself (given the tax-exempt status of religious institutions), it would ultimately, in a cyclical pattern, also result in the decline of the state.

> The procedure for acquiring merit integrated religion and economic growth: building temples and monasteries and endowing them with land and labor not only distributed goods and services, created jobs, and stimulated industry, it was the means to salvation. There exists no better testimonial to the relationship between the desire for merit and its quantitative material consequences than the estimated three to four thousand temples that once filled the twenty-five square miles of the capital city, Pagan...
>
> ...Pagan stands as an example of religious endowments and temple-building that acted as stimulants to agricultural production and a variety of related "industries"; people were attracted into the kingdom where the religion flourished, the culture was exquisite, and festivities and work were plentiful. It was only after several hundred years of searching for merit and salvation that these tax-exempt endowments of land and labor became a drain on government resources; and it is only then that the decline of the state can be related to temple-building—even then not so much to building per se but to the perpetual tax-exempt status of temple lands and their labor.[32]

While it is not clear that the cyclical pattern found in Burma is found elsewhere, building projects often seem to be associated with the assertion of royal moral authority and processes of political integration in Southeast Asian Buddhist polities. The Indian monarch Asoka, so often taken as a model of the Buddhist monarch in Southeast Asia, is said to have built 84,000 stupas.[33] Thompson argues that the middle-period Khmer monarch Ang Chan's reign was a period of cultural regeneration and social integration associated with renewed interest in the cult of the Maitreya; this corresponded with the culture's high regard for the construction of stupas.[34]

How this relates to villagers' everyday merit-building is not easy to say. While keeping in mind Katherine Bowie's admonition that merit is made not *only* through

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[31] Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985), p. 45.

[32] Ibid., pp. 169–70.

[33] Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 70.

[34] Thompson, "The Future of Cambodia's Past," pp. 13–39.

gifts to the *wat* or the monkhood,[35] and L. M. Hanks's classic description of the fluidity of merit-making in practice,[36] it must be acknowledged that the *wat* and the Sangha continue to be very powerful fields of merit, and very much inscribed as such in public discourse. The association between religious-building projects and merit-making is especially strong. In my field experience, I have noted that it is considered strong praise for a monk to be called *pukae kosang*—"powerful at building"—as though, much as in the case of the circular logic described by Aung-Thwin, the monk who can organize building projects does not just make merit but demonstrates that he already has a font of merit that empowers him. Tambiah, surveying Thai villagers in the 1960s, found that of seventy-nine family heads asked to rank the merit generated by various religious acts, sixty-seven gave the highest rank to "financing the entire building of a *wat*."[37] Spiro, writing on Burma, comes to similar conclusions:

> As in the case of the charitable acts discussed above, these various types of *ahlu* [meritorious celebration] are also graded according to the amount of merit they yield. Thus, the most merit is acquired by building a pagoda [stupa], closely followed by the building of a monastery [*wat*] ... [T]he fact that few Burmans can afford to build a pagoda or a monastery has had the consequence, of course, of confining the meaning of *dāna* to [other forms] of giving, especially of food.[38]

None of this really acknowledges the degree to which religious-building projects often involve fund-raising within an entire community, with each small contributor gaining some of the merit of the entire project—the organizer, of course, gains the greatest merit. It is this process that is celebrated in the bas-reliefs of *prasat pech*. There is thus an ambiguity about the merit-generating power of building religious structures. It creates hierarchy, in that individual sponsors of religious buildings or even fund-raisers gain much merit for themselves. At the same time, there is an underlying egalitarianism in the fact that each small contributor is gaining merit and agency in relation to the larger social process. The process underscores ties among organizers and relatively small contributions. In fact, religious fund-raising (which so often relates to building projects) is one of the few truly communal rituals in Cambodian society, a practice that at once confirms hierarchy and gives agency to the entire community. It is perhaps for this reason that in times of social chaos, the logic of Cambodian (and Theravadin) society calls for massive acts of charity as a means of restoring moral order.

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[35] Katherine A. Bowie, "The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand," *American Anthropologist* 100,2 (1998): 469–81.

[36] L. M. Hanks, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962): 1247–59.

[37] Stanley J. Tambiah, "The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village," in *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, ed. E. R. Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 68.

[38] Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, second edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

NARRATIVE

Various narratives are coming into play here, all of them touching on the idea of nation, although not all of them clearly constitute a "narrative of the nation," whereby, in keeping with Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, a population comes to think of itself as a single community moving in a common direction. Similar to Tambiah's conception of millennialism, the narrative of the *Putth Tumneay* itself is very much a narrative of galactic polity, focusing on redemption through the emergence of a prophesied center of the mandala. The fact that the Khmer version of this prophecy appeared in conjunction with French colonialism, and that prophecies with roots in universal Buddhist narratives became in the *Putth Tumneay* specific to Cambodia, suggest that a conception of national identity was beginning to touch this narrative in a "modern" way.

The statement from the project's booklet that Ros Sarin "wants our nation to prosper and move in the direction of high culture like other countries in the world" is clearly following the model of a narrative of the nation. The narrative here is one that projects a civilization that extends from the civilization of Angkor to the present time and *from there* points "in the direction of high culture like other countries in the world." Thus the strange linguistic construction that makes the living Ros Sarin both a "forefather" and an "ancestor," as presented in the quotation from the booklet cited above, paralleling the way the creators of Angkor were distinguished "ancestors" of the entire Khmer population. Even more telling is the fact that, along with statuary of gods, Ros Sarin places statues of a Cambodian man and woman in modern-day dress, emphasizing that the *prasat*s are not merely celestial creations, but something relating to present-day Cambodians.

The use of Angkor as a national symbol dates to the French colonial period, and Keyes[39] and Penny Edwards[40] have shown convincingly that this usage reflects a modern construction of nation. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest some ambiguity here, noting that the religious-building project, while claiming to, performatively, create (the modern) nation can at the same time, by generating a center for millennial transformation, make reference to the (supposedly pre-modern) idea of a galactic polity configured around a spiritual center.

This modern/pre-modern ambiguity is also mirrored by the fact that a rumored role of the king (the center of a galactic polity and, by implication, above it, vertically) combines with the more horizontal image of the project as something communal, the result of the donations of many small, individual Cambodians.

It is the narrative of building in the bas-reliefs at *prasat pech* that are most startlingly "modern"—beginning with the fact that they are executed in a socialist-realist style, but also in the very self-consciousness by which they evoke the community effort to build the temple. The bas-reliefs make the statement that *contemporary* Cambodians are capable of building in the same way that the creators of Angkor were, a message that underlines the image of a lineal descent from Angkor at the same time it calls up an imagined sense of community. While a community effort of this sort cannot be called particularly modern—communities

[39] Charles F. Keyes, "The Legacy of Angkor," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14,3 (1990): 56–59.

[40] Penny Edwards, "Imaging the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse before and during the UNTAC Period," in *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-Keeping*, ed. Steve Heder and Judy Ledgerwood (Armonk, NY, and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 50–72.

have worked together to raise support for *wats* in this way for centuries, and doubtless were informed by an intuitive folk-narrative of construction—it is perhaps very modern to inscribe and celebrate publicly the mass horizontal mobilization of a population (horizontal in the degree to which it is presented as the mobilization in solidarity of equals). Moreover, the monumentalism of *prasat pech* suggests that this is a narrative that goes beyond the story of a single building project. It is a narrative which, in Homi Bhabha's terms, is *performative*, in the way that it celebrates community agency, while at the same time serving as a *pedagogical* vision of how a community *should* act.

An incongruity basic to the project as a whole is the fact that such a narrative, implying as it does the primacy of the horizontal community, should occur in a building crowned by the more vertical symbolism of the coming Maitreya.

MORAL ORDER AND HIERARCHY

In "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," Chandler writes:

> The three texts that I have discussed suggest that there were two contrasting perceptions of moral order in early nineteenth-century Cambodia. They were not, as one might expect, perceptions on the part of those in power *versus* perceptions of the powerless, or perceptions of people who could read *versus* those of people who could not. Rather, there was a moral order for everyone—or at least those reachable by texts of this kind—based on prescription, memorization, and teaching, largely Buddhist in orientation on the one hand, and perceptions rooted in the real world on the other. The first was a celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good. The second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on.[41]

In other words, there is ideology and practice—and sometimes a wide gap between the two.

Chandler does not discuss modernity, but his article grows out of an intellectual climate that characterized "traditional" societies as timeless and hierarchical, in implicit contrast with more egalitarian and time-oriented "modern" societies. Chandler convincingly shows that at least one ideological strand of pre-French Cambodia (doubtless the most public one) valorized hierarchy. The power of the article comes from the fact that it is so deeply embedded in the textual details of history and what they reveal of the practical situation of those attempting "to survive inside the framework of what was going on," that it brings to the surface the deep, painful contradictions of this ideology.

The historical upheavals Chandler's article refers to document all too well the "pulsating" nature of the Southeast Asian galactic polity apparent in Tambiah's model. (For more-contemporary settings, the shifting, constantly negotiated nature of hierarchy is also explored, in the case of Thailand, by Hanks, neatly anticipating Bourdieu.[42]) I believe the evidence of these scholars suggests that, however much there may have been a public ideology of hierarchy, there has been (even,

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[41] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 97.

[42] Hanks, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," pp. 1247–59. Compare to Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

presumably, in pre-modern Southeast Asia) an ideology of individual agency, perhaps less publicly articulated, which in some measure undermined the ideology of hierarchy. I am not sure that the moral order implied by the ideology of hierarchy is necessarily more important to Cambodian society than is the moral order implied by the balance between individuals as agents. What is interesting is that in the mobilization of resources around religious-building projects, it is possible to have, ambiguously, both.

While suspending judgment on what is "modern" and what is "traditional," we can say that a movement like Ros Sarin's combined hierarchy and egalitarianism in an interesting way. On the one hand, the very idea of creating a center of spiritual power is essentially hierarchical, since it implies the creation of a model and an object of deference—to the movement itself and, perhaps, to those who had sufficient merit to sponsor it. On the other hand, Ros Sarin does not claim to be a king or a potential king, and much of the rhetoric of the movement depicts it as oriented to the *public*: as drawing from the small contributions from the mass of individual Cambodians; of benefiting from the donated labor of members of the community (illustrated in the semi-mythical world of the bas-reliefs); and of providing a range of attractions and activities that will be of interest to all ages.

Critique and Contradiction

As Tambiah has suggested, cults around holy men have worked on behalf of the civilizing mission of state formation, but at the same time, contradictorily, they have "... questioned, and even attacked, the established political and religious systems."[43] It is easy to see that Ros Sarin's movement claims to be a civilizing force. To what extent does it also represent a critique?

Other parallel religious-building projects, such as that of Tapas, make a point of emphasizing their subaltern status, presenting themselves as vulnerable in relation to the Cambodian government, and Cambodia as vulnerable in relation to the world. Ros Sarin's affiliation with the Ministry of Interior and the high-ranking figures on whom the project has been able to call for donations or appearances at inauguration ceremonies does not suggest an oppositional stance. Rather, it is one of the few movements of its kind in which I have found no evidence of government opposition. (The literature for the project makes a point of emphasizing that each stage of the construction has been approved by the Ministry of Religion.)

As I noted above, the similarities surrounding several religious-building projects—all of which draw on the ideas of a continuous connection to Angkor, the guidance of a spiritual leader, and the building of a *prasat meas* and a *prasat prak*—can be described in terms of a cultural schema. Ortner argues that cultural schemata relate ultimately to the underlying contradictions of a society. Writing about the schemata surrounding narratives of the founding of Sherpa temples, she found that they related to patterns of inheritance and a basic contradiction between ideologies of hierarchy and egalitarianism.[44] Perhaps it is impossible in the case of Ros Sarin's projects to relate the schema so closely to specific contradictions. What may be possible to say, following Tambiah's argument, is that the contradictions of a galactic polity—with a weak bureaucratic center, no clear territorial focus, and a lack of

[43] Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, p. 294.

[44] Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*, p. 60.

descent-based groupings—lend themselves to periodic millennial movements that envisage a new center for the mandala. Our cultural schema—the pattern whereby certain iconography and cultural practices occur together in different building projects at a particular historical moment—is at least superficially more modern, taking place within the reference frame of the nation-state, specifically using symbols of the nation and calling for mass contribution. Perhaps it is the very tension between a vision of galactic polity (still very real in Cambodian political practice) and a vision of nation that could be described as the contradiction underlying our schema.

Ros Sarin's movement evokes the weak position of Cambodia internationally, and expresses the wish that Cambodia assume its rightful place with the civilized countries of the world. While the movement is far from militant, it implicitly makes the statement that the current social order is not enough. Like the other movements, it appeals to a popular perception that Buddhism as it is practiced in Cambodia today is not adequate to meet the spiritual needs of the country.

The idea of order on which Chandler draws in "Songs" leaves open the question of how such an order is realized in practice. In the narratives he recounts, one can see evidence that the restoration of moral order is often associated with religious-building projects, an idea that resonates with long-standing Theravada notions of the great merit accrued through such construction, as well as, perhaps, in a more modern context, a national narrative of how Cambodia achieved its ancient greatness. There emerged in 1990s Cambodia a number of movements focused on religious-building construction. While each movement is distinctive, they follow similar patterns and draw on similar iconography, suggesting, in Ortner's terms, a common cultural schema. In each case there is the authority of a religious ascetic, Angkorean iconography, and references to prophetic texts. Ros Sarin's project is, at one level, the millennial cult of a small group of followers; at another level, it is a popular tourist destination. This ambiguity perhaps has something to do with the fact that it has been one of the longest lasting of these projects, and one of the projects that has succeeded in building on a grand scale. As a dense locus of Cambodian iconography and myth, it is truly fascinating.

Appendix A

What follows is Burlingame's published translation of the traditional Pali story.[45] A brief, oral version based on the author's field notes is included in the text.

> The story goes that at Benāres lived a youth named Nandiya, son of a family endowed with faith ... Nandiya, having come into great wealth on the death of his mother and father, established alms for the Congregation of Monks, and likewise established at the door of his house regular distribution of cooked food to poor folk and travelers. Somewhat later, after hearing the Teacher preach the Law, considering within himself the blessings that would accrue to him through the gift of a dwelling to the monks, he caused a quadruple hall, furnished with four chambers, to be erected at the Great Monastery of Isipatana. And having caused beds and couches to be spread, he presented this dwelling to the Congregation of Monks presided over by the Buddha, giving alms, and pouring Water of Donation into the right hand of the Tathāgata. As the Water of Donation fell into the right hand of the Teacher, there arose in the World of the Thirty-three a celestial mansion extending twelve leagues in all directions, a hundred leagues high, made of the seven kinds of jewels, and filled with celestial nymphs.
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> One day when Elder Moggallāna the Great went on a pilgrimage to the World of the Gods, he stopped near this palace and asked some deities who approached him, "Through whose merit came into existence this celestial mansion filled with a company of celestial nymphs?" Then those deities informed him who was lord of the mansion, saying, "Reverend Sir, a householder's son named Nandiya caused a monastery to be erected at Isipatana and gave it to the Teacher, and through his merit this celestial mansion came into existence." Thereupon the company of celestial nymphs descended from that palace and said to the Elder, "Reverend Sir, we would be the slaves of Nandiya. Although we have been reborn here, we are exceedingly unhappy because we do not see him; pray tell him to come here. For putting off human estate and taking the estate of a deity is like breaking a vessel of clay and taking a vessel of gold."
>
> The Elder departed thence, and approaching the Teacher, asked him, "Reverend Sir, is it true that while men yet remain in the world of men, they attain heavenly glory as the fruit of the good works which they have performed?" The Teacher replied, "Moggallāna, you have seen with your own eyes the heavenly glory which Nandiya has attained in the World of the Gods: why do you ask me such a question?" Said the Elder, "Then it is really true, Reverend Sir!" Said the Teacher, "Moggallāna, why do you talk thus? If a son or a brother who has long been absent from home returns from his absence, whoever at the village gate sees him

[45] Eugene Watson Burlingame, translator, *Buddhist Legends: Translation from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary, Part II: Translation of Books 13 to 26* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, [1921] 1999), pp. 92–94.

hurries home and says, 'so-and-so is back.' And straightway his kinsfolk, pleased and delighted, will hasten forth and greet him, saying, 'Dear friend, you have returned at last!' Even so, when either a woman or a man who has done works of merit here leaves this world and goes to the next, the heavenly deities take presents of ten sorts and go forth to meet him and to greet him, saying, 'Let me be first! Let me be first!'"

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RITUAL IN 1990 CAMBODIAN POLITICAL THEATRE: NEW SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

Judy Ledgerwood

INTRODUCTION

On November first and second, 1990, a series of activities and ceremonies were held in Phnom Penh—the planting of a Bodhi tree, boat races, fireworks, and a parade of decorated boats—all culminating in a ceremony on the steps of the "Former Royal Palace" (as it was then officially known). There, in a Buddhist and Brahminist ritual, lighted candles were used to predict the outcome of the rice harvest, and the first new rice grains, pounded and fried into crunchy flakes (*ambok*), were eaten by the handful as the celebrants tipped back their heads and stared up at the full moon of the lunar month of *Kattek* at the auspicious place where the four rivers meet (*chatomukh*). The Mekong and the Tonle Sap were just past high flood, and the Tonle Sap would soon reverse course and drain away the water from the great lake, leaving the soil replenished and a vast abundance of fish trapped in the waters that remained. At this crucial moment in the ritual and agricultural cycles, the celebrants who stood on the steps of the palace were not royalty by birth, but were the triumvirate that had ruled the socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) for the previous ten years: Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen.

This paper is an interpretive cultural analysis of the events surrounding the celebration of the Water Festival and their historical context that explores the meaning of the ceremonies for the actors who participated as celebrants and organizers. My analysis draws on recent discussions of public cultural displays and their political meanings. In an article reviewing the state-of-the-field on the anthropology of Southeast Asia, John Bowen wrote that the study of "publicly displayed cultural forms," whether analyses of highland feasting rituals or of ritual speech, have long dominated the field. Examples of the study of public action from the sixties and seventies, particularly the early work of Clifford Geertz, held that the meanings of these actions were assumed by-and-large to be "intrinsic to objects and coherent among themselves." Bowen writes,

> As "intrinsic" meanings were taken to be mainly the same for all observers and thus decodable by the trained ethnographer—"looking over the shoulder" as Geertz (1972) once put it. As "coherent," meanings were assumed to form an internally consistent pattern, whether in their semantic interreference (Geertz's "logico-meaningful integration"), their structural interrelationship (Lévi-Strauss's "structure"), or their dependence on certain overarching values (Dumont's "ideology").[1]

This anthropological literature assumed that there was a logical, discernable meaning to the public event that could be "read" as a text by a local observer or by a trained outsider observer, the ethnographer.

More recently, Bowen notes, there has been a shift to a new approach to the study of cultural forms and displays. They are seen "not as containing meanings, but as giving rise to the creation of meanings by differently situated actors, meanings that are often in conflict with each other and that are not always resolvable to an internally coherent structure."[2] How do these differently situated actors interpret the events, how might these interpretations change over time, and what are the various motivations of the actors? The shift is within and not completely away from interpretive analysis. One of its aspects has been anthropologists turning toward political analysis and a focus on the relationship between culture and the nation state.

Hence there has been a reappraisal of the term "culture," moving away from the notion that culture is a single set of ideas or meanings shared by a homogeneous population, which reproduces itself from generation to generation. Instead, scholars now recognize that the essential discourses of a place and time are made authoritative by those with the power to silence other possible interpretations. Susan Wright writes of the politicization of the concept of culture,

> Each actor endeavoured to manoeuvre, in unpredictable political and economic situations, to define or seize control of symbols and practices. Symbols and ideas never acquired a closed or entirely coherent set of meanings: they were polyvalent, fluid and hybridized. Key terms shifted meaning in different historical times. When a coalition of actors gained ascendance at a particular historical moment, they institutionalized their meaning of key terms in law.[3]

Culture may thus be described as a "contested process of meaning making," the contest being over who has control of defining the meaning of key symbols, terms, and concepts.[4]

Like anthropologists, many historians of Southeast Asia employ cultural forms of analysis. This paper, in the spirit of this volume, takes as a starting point the classic essay by David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of

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[1] John Bowen, "The Forms Culture Takes: A State of the Field Essay on the Anthropology of Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54,4 (1995): 1049.

[2] Ibid., pp. 1049–50.

[3] Susan Wright, "The Politicization of Culture," *Anthropology Today* 14,1 (1998): 7–15.

[4] Ibid., p. 4.

Order in Three Cambodian Texts."[5] Chandler uses two folktales and a historical text to recreate a moment in the nineteenth century, when Cambodia was just emerging from a period of extended violent conflict. He sees the writing and performance of a historical text at the dedication of a new temple as a method of recreating social and moral order in the chaotic aftermath of violence. Chandler posits a shared cultural understanding of conceptions of order, and a moral underpinning to the pattern based on Buddhist notions of merit and the karmic consequences of one's actions. He writes,

> The word for "order" (as in, "to put in order"), or more exactly, the phrase *robab rap roy*, means "the way things are [properly] arranged," to place them symmetrically like books and papers on a desk and also rank them correctly, i.e., hierarchically, the way they have been ranked before.[6]

There is an important contrast in Khmer culture between wildness (*prei*, forest) and the quality of being settled (*veal*, field, or *srok*, country/community), the latter referring to that which is "grown, civilized, arranged, predictable."[7] The stories that Chandler explores in his essay concern the boundary between these two realms, and historical Khmer understandings of how this boundary is constructed and maintained. For there to be social order, there must be a righteous ruler at the top of a social and moral hierarchy.

The shared cultural understandings about power and order that Chandler explains are based in Theravada Buddhism, and earlier influences were derived from Hinduism. Leaders have their positions because they have accumulated merit through numerous lifetimes—as kings, their divine energy radiates outward and encompasses others, creating order and stability—but the degree to which this order can be maintained depends on the ruler acting in accordance with the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings, or in a more general sense, morality). The ability of each ruler to harness that divine energy and maintain his kingdom varies "since the cosmos is always in flux, alternating between periods of coherence and fragmentation."[8] Buddhist notions of time are cyclical; between the coming of one Buddha and the next, there will be a long period of decline, to be followed by the coming of a new ruler who will restore the Dharma, which commences a new period of steady improvement until the perfection that characterizes the time of the next Buddha and the beginning of a new cycle.[9]

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[5] David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), pp. 76–99.

[6] Ibid., p. 77.

[7] Chandler, "Songs," p. 77; see also Penny Edwards, "Between a Song and a *Prei*: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest," and Erik W. Davis, "Imaginary Conversations with Mothers about Death," this volume.

[8] Alexander Hinton, "Purity and Contamination in the Cambodian Genocide," in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002), p. 75.

[9] See Frank Reynolds, "The Two Wheels of the Dhamma: A Study of Early Buddhism," in *The Two Wheels of the Dhamma*, ed. Frank Reynolds and Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972), pp. 6–30; also Anne Hansen, "Gaps in the World: Harm and Violence in Khmer Buddhist Narrative," this volume.

Chandler elsewhere describes the ritual aspects of the reign of King Duang (1848–1860), as recorded in two chronicles of the reign.[10] He was intrigued that more than half of the documents recorded an enumeration of ceremonies, decrees, and political acts that took place at the beginning of the reign. Telling the story of the actions of the monarch at the outset, Chandler argues, "set[s] in motion a narrative performance," like the "winding of a clock."[11] The King rebuilds his palace, rebuilds and repopulates Buddhist temples, reestablishes the royal patronage of Buddhism and the arts, distributes symbols of rank to officials and military leaders, institutes reforms to linguistic etiquette that set "proper responses and forms of address between people of different status," and renames people and places.[12] According to Chandler, the judgment of the king's performance arose less from his dealings with other people, "but from his pre-arranged, repeated dealings with moments of the agricultural cycle, with ceremonies involving the placement and status of his officials, and with rites directed towards Hindu gods, local spirits, or the Buddhist church."[13]

Drawing on these historical insights, this paper analyzes the 1990 ceremonies as a parallel attempt at the end of the twentieth century to reassert social and political order in the wake of the devastation of war and revolution in the 1970s and 80s. While Chandler saw King Duong's actions as the reassertion of a resonant Khmer cultural model in the nineteenth century, I see Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin as political actors seeking to redefine and employ key symbols in a competition for power. In this "contested process of meaning making," they set out to assert that a new reign had already begun, and that they are the legitimate, righteous rulers of Cambodia.

The paper is divided into three sections: the first reviews the historical context, focusing on the political negotiations that would result in the Paris Peace Agreements, and the changes that occurred during this transition period; the second considers the religious context, discussing the destruction of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge regime and its gradual rebuilding thereafter; and the third considers the stated purpose of the ritual as described in the program for the event and a subsequent state publication. What was it they said that they were doing? From these data, I posit an interpretive analysis that focuses on the ways in which the State of Cambodia (SOC) leadership appropriated the key cultural concepts, "Nation, Religion, and King," to undergird the legitimacy of their political control. They claimed for themselves the mantle of righteous rulers who restore order and morality, while asserting their "Khmerness" in the face of accusations that they were mere puppets of the Vietnamese. With the peace deal essentially done and the return of the former King Sihanouk only a year away, why assert their political legitimacy in this particular way, at this particular moment?

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[10] David Chandler, "Going Through the Motions: Ritual Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia (1848–1860)," in *Facing the Cambodian Past*, pp. 100–118.

[11] Ibid., pp. 101–2.

[12] Ibid., pp. 105–6.

[13] Ibid., p. 106.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the three years prior to the 1990 festival, peace negotiations had been underway between the Cambodian parties and their regional and superpower backers, trying to bring about an end to the war that had ground on to a stalemate since the Vietnamese invasion in 1979. Several crucial moments of political symbolism occurred in the course of the negotiations. Hun Sen addressed Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former king, using royal vocabulary. The general population understood this to be a momentous shift in the political landscape. In the spring of 1989, changes to the Cambodian constitution and the declaration of the new State of Cambodia (SOC) government cleared the way for economic reforms legalizing private ownership of land and the reintroduction of a market economy. Buddhist religious prayers were again broadcast on the radio. This too had a tremendous impact on the thinking of ordinary people. These were clues that perhaps there could be a shift from the communist rhetoric and policies of the last fourteen years to something that more closely resembled pre-war Cambodian society—including a return of the central icons of religion and king.

That same week, in April of 1989, Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and Heng Samrin participated in a religious ceremony to reinstall a sacred relic of the Buddha in the Sakyamuni *chetey* (a Buddhist reliquary known as a stupa or *chedi*) in front of the railway station in Phnom Penh.[14] Thousands of people came out to see this event, which included the offering of rice to the monks by the former communist leaders of the new SOC.

In September 1989, the Vietnamese army withdrew from Cambodia. Initially there was a good deal of tension as people wondered if the Cambodian army could hold the resistance forces at bay. While there were attacks, and the resistance forces were able to establish bases on the Khmer side of the border, it became clear over time that they were not making significant gains. The SOC government continued to hold some 90 percent of the Cambodian countryside.

At the time, the common perception was that peace was at hand, that the king's return would herald a new period of economic prosperity, and that ordinary people's lives could return to something resembling the normalcy of the pre-war years. Everyone stopped using the term "comrade," and there was an easing of certain restrictions, including those that prohibited contact with foreigners.[15]

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[14] The *chetey* had been built in preparation for the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of Buddhism, and the relic had been transported from Sri Lanka. After King Sihanouk returned to Cambodia, he announced that the location at the train station was no longer an appropriate place for the relic. Ashley Thompson has written that this was likely linked to the state of "urban decay and dereliction" at the railway station, which had earlier been a sight of "national unity and modernity." See Ashley Thompson, "Buddhism in Modern Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity," in *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Berkwitz (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 129–68. But it seems logical that his disapproval was also related to the reinstallation ceremony in 1989. Only in 2002 was the relic moved to a newly constructed stupa on a sacred mountain near Oudong. The king is reported to have said that the new location, the site of an ancient capital, was a "holy place," and that the transfer would bring "greater peace, happiness, and success to Cambodia." Kuch Naren, "Reverential Procession Takes Relics to Oudong," *Cambodia Daily*, December 20, 2002, p. 19.

[15] I had only just arrived in Cambodia for what would be a three-year project, and I remember this period as a time of intense optimism. Foreigners were able to live outside the hotels in rented houses and to meet Khmer outside of the confines of the workplace. There were still Ministry of Interior operatives, who came to debrief my colleagues at the National Library

THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Hun Sen, the SOC prime minister and foreign minister, met with Prince Norodom Sihanouk in December 1987 and January 1988. In July 1988, at the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM I), and in February 1989, at JIM II, all four Cambodian political factions and representatives of Vietnam, Laos, and ASEAN met. A Paris conference in August 1989 included representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the Perm 5). In January 1990, a meeting was held in Tokyo, where the main topics included a ceasefire to begin in May 1990 and the establishment of a Supreme National Council, the body that would symbolically hold national sovereignty during the transition period while UN forces organized democratic elections.[16]

Crucial steps forward were taken in 1990, paving the way for an eventual settlement. The United States dropped its support for the CGDK (Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea) to hold the seat at the UN, Sihanouk dropped his demand that the SOC be dismantled, and China pressured Vietnam and Cambodia to agree to the participation of United Nations forces in a settlement.[17] The "final breakthrough," according to MacAlister Brown and Josephy Zasloff, came in August 1990, when the Perm 5 set forth a document entitled, "Framework for a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict." After this six-page plan was accepted by all the parties, the next year was spent, Brown and Zasloff write, "working out the details."[18] In the meeting of September 1990, the Supreme National Council was formally created. The Paris Peace Treaty was finally signed in October 1991.[19]

Thus, by the time of the Water Festival in November 1990, the momentum of the negotiations and the changes in world politics made it clear to people on the ground that the process was going forward, but it was unclear exactly how the changes underway would unfold, and who the winners and losers would be.

As these events were playing out in 1989–90, Westerners doing political analysis of the scene in Cambodia were divided. The most vocal analyst at the time was a

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about my activities, and there were still party political meetings, where speakers railed against the evil imperialists, but no one seemed to be paying much attention.

[16] For an extended discussion of this process, see Sorpong Peou, *Conflict Neutralization in the Cambodia War: From Battlefield to Ballot Box* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and MacAlister Brown and Josephy Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers, 1979–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[17] See Raoul Jennar, *Chroniques cambodgiennes, 1990–1994* (Paris: Harmattan, 1995); Peou, *Conflict Neutralization*; and, on the latter point, Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 1994), p. 256.

[18] Brown and Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounds*, pp. 71–72.

[19] A sense of outrage remained among many Khmer and international observers in response to the fact that the Khmer Rouge were included as a party to the agreements. But the fact that the DK military was the main military force of the CGDK, and that the Chinese had to be party to any agreement, meant that the Khmer Rouge were included at the table. For detailed discussions of the negotiation process and the issues surrounding the DK's inclusion in the Paris Agreements, see Peou, *Conflict Neutralization*; Brown and Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounds*; and Ben Kiernan, "The Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian Peace Process: Causes and Consequences," in *Genocide and Democracy*, ed. Ben Kiernan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1993), pp. 191–272.

political lobbyist named Raoul Jennar, who was hired by a consortium of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Jennar wrote a series of reports in 1990 that, with the luxury of hindsight, seem overly alarmist. He maintained that there was "serious doubt" about the SOC's capacity to survive beyond a period ranging from between six and eighteen months.[20] This argument was based on several premises: that the Khmer Rouge resistance fighters were making significant military gains in the countryside; that the SOC could not survive economically without Russian and Eastern block assistance; that as a consequence of the reforms there was a mounting economic and social crisis, including a rise in corruption; and that there was an internal struggle for control of the SOC underway.

Jennar envisioned an internal battle between "hardliners" led by Chea Sim and "reformers" led by Hun Sen, with the latter in favor of implementing true liberal reforms and the former clinging rigidly to "Stalinist" ideals. Hun Sen was championed by Jennar as a true democrat; Jennar urged the US Senate to recognize the SOC government so as to back the reformer before a backlash from the hardliners threatened the forward pace of economic reform and peace negotiations.

French researcher Serge Thion also perceived Chea Sim as the man behind a political crackdown that took place in early 1990. He wrote, "Chea Sim could not see this internal threat without reacting. His point was that, in the middle of the delicate process of negotiations, the Party had to stick together ... [Hun Sen's] reformist views were dangerous for the people in power, because their political system was destabilized by the very process of negotiation..."[21]

Historian Ben Kiernan, on the other hand, argued that the Vietnamese withdrawal had not brought about any significant change in the balance of military power.[22] Writing after a visit to Cambodia in 1990, historian Michael Vickery agreed that there was no sign of imminent SOC collapse. Vickery also took issue with Jennar's characterization of Chea Sim as a "hardliner" and with Jennar's allegations of splits within the SOC. Rather, Vickery argued that, while the economic reforms such as a return to private property had been popular, a rising gap in wealth between rich and poor, widespread corruption, and devaluation of the *riel* all raised questions about the success of the reforms. Vickery submitted that perhaps Chea Sim and others were interested in restraining the reforms not because they were communist hardliners, but because they were responsible politicians concerned about the well-being of the population.[23]

The propaganda broadcast by the resistance forces along the Thai-Cambodian border, widely believed by overseas Khmer, argued meanwhile that the Vietnamese army had never left. In exaggerated claims, this propaganda alleged that the SOC was not a functioning government, but was a military occupying force without popular legitimacy that would collapse if it were no longer propped up by external military force. At least some members of the Khmer resistance camped along the border, and those living abroad imagined a Cambodia waiting for them to return and retake their rightful place as rulers.

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[20] Jennar, *Chroniques*, report dated June 1990, p. 10

[21] Serge Thion, *Watching Cambodia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993), p. 194.

[22] Kiernan, "The Inclusion," p. 209.

[23] Michael Vickery, "The Campaign against Cambodia, 1990–1991," *Indochina Issues*, August 1991, pp. 1–11.

We now know from Evan Gottesman's research using notes from PRK and SOC internal meetings that Hun Sen and Chea Sim were rivals, but not over ideological issues. Of the three, it was Heng Samrin who would soon be pushed aside as an outmoded ideologue. Hun Sen and Chea Sim were both pragmatists who had built their own individual patronage networks that assured them of loyal followers and resources to carry over into the new regime. While they were negotiating a deal to bring about peace, they had no intention of giving up power. They envisioned allowing the existence of "minority parties" that would acknowledge their subservience to the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Hun Sen said in a meeting of the Council of State in 1989, "In this society that we are currently guiding, we are not yet permitting the creation of political parties. If there is a political solution and if [opposition politicians] come [to Cambodia], there should be mutual give-and-take. They repay us by recognizing us as the central leader. We repay them by recognizing them as a legal party."[24]

In a meeting in July 1989 with the Ministers of Interior of Vietnam and Laos, Hun Sen announced their strategy:

> "Before we didn't expect to win militarily, and we decided to choose a political solution" he told the visitors. "But then the balance of forces shifted, and the leadership came up with the strategy of 'no political solution concerning internal views.'" Hun Sen explained that because the party was "still seeking a political solution with regard to international views," it was "playing both sides," meaning that publicly it would present a more liberal face. "This is an issue that is absolutely secret in the strategy of the Party," he added.[25]

The plan was to agree to liberalization in dealing with the outside world, but to hold the line on allowing political change within the country. But economic change was another matter.

Jenner was correct in pointing out that the SOC faced significant economic problems, including corruption. The decision to privatize state assets was taken in an attempt to raise money to pay for the war, as well as a way to preempt any claims to state resources by returnees after a settlement. The industrial sector was transferred over to the party.[26] The SOC leadership was also keen to proceed with distribution of land to private citizens. Gottesman writes,

> Basing land rights on post-1979 possession, the regime intended to preclude claims by Cambodians returning from refugee camps and from overseas. By granting private ownership to the people, it also hoped to preempt campaign promises from the resistance.[27]

During 1990, however, faced with a degree of uncertainty, SOC officials began selling off state property for their own personal gain. Some of the sales were sanctioned; high-ranking officials were deeded villas around the city that could be

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[24] Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 306.

[25] Ibid., p. 307.

[26] Ibid., pp. 320–21.

[27] Ibid., p. 320.

rented out for high profits to the masses of incoming aid workers and UN staff. But in other cases, the selling off of assets and charging of "fees" for services went beyond the "sanctioned" corruption and spiraled out of control. One foreign aid worker referred to it as "panicked looting."[28] Loyal state workers who had served the PRK for years with almost no salary discerned that if the government changed, they would have nothing to show for their years of service. So they skimmed off and sold state assets—in some cases, even their own desks. Gottesman says that, by 1990, the scope of government corruption was "alarming"; almost any government service, from health care to education, required a bribe. The minutes of the Council of Ministers shows that the leadership was aware of the problem, but refused to acknowledge it publicly.[29]

Jennar's report on his October–November 1990 visit to Phnom Penh described his own dire predictions coming true. Inflation was high: the price of rice was up from 15 *riels* a kilo to 120 *riels* a kilo, and petrol from 90 *riels* to 350 *riels* a liter. The value of the riel was down, and absenteeism and corruption were up, bringing about the climate of "the end of a reign."[30]

The SOC faced a problem. Within its own ranks, members feared that a new government might come to power after the UN-sponsored elections, and that concern triggered a scramble to accumulate immediate personal profit. But at the top level, the leadership was not divided. While they had feared that they might lose as much as 30 percent of the country to the resistance after the Vietnamese withdrawal, they had instead succeeded in maintaining control.[31] They saw themselves as engineering a transition in which they could promise change to outsiders, thereby procuring needed concessions and resources, while simultaneously taking actions to ensure that they would retain their own grip on power. They would give the minority parties the right to exist, and in exchange the returnees would need to acknowledge their right to rule.

THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM (1975–1989)

A set of Buddhist prophetic texts known as the *Putth Tumneay* carry predictions that, at the time of the midpoint in the cycle between buddhas, at about 2500 years (1953 by the Christian calendar), there will be a period of death and destruction.[32] According to the most well-known lines of the various versions of the vernacular

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[28] For a discussion of the situation as described in the Khmer media at the time, see John Marston, "Cambodia 1991–94: Hierarchy, Neutrality, and Etiquettes of Discourse" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1997). In December 1991, students and state worker protests would erupt over the sale of state property by the transportation minister, not so much, as Thion points out, because they objected to the corruption, but because they had not gotten a share. These protests were violently suppressed, and at least eight people were killed. See Thion, *Watching Cambodia*, pp. 188, 194–97.

[29] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 326.

[30] Jennar, *Chroniques*, report dated December 1990, p. 3

[31] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 309.

[32] Also transliterated as *Buddh Damnây*. Anne Hansen and I are currently conducting research on the range of texts known collectively as the *Putth Tumneay*. For a discussion of the origins of the texts and a translation of one version to French, see Olivier de Bernon, "*Le Buddh Damnây*: Note sur un Texte Apocalyptique Khmer," *BEFEO* 81 (1994): 83–96; and "La Prédiction du Bouddha," *Aséanie* 1 (1998): 43–66.

text: "Blood will run as high as the belly of an elephant," "there will be houses in which no one lives, roads upon which no one travels," and "people will fight over a grain of rice stuck to the tail of a dog." During this time, the texts predict, Buddhism will be nearly completely destroyed, and the *tamil*, the ignorant infidels, will come to rule the land. It is understandable why many Khmer see the fulfillment of these prophecies in the period of Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979. Democratic Kampuchea (DK) deliberately set out to destroy the practice of Buddhism.

Senior monks in the Sangha hierarchy were killed immediately. The remaining monks were forced to disrobe, most by early 1976. In one study, Chanthou Boua interviewed twenty-nine surviving monks, all of whom had disrobed under threat of death. They reported that those who refused to do so were immediately taken away and presumably killed.[33] The death toll of Buddhist monks during DK is not known. Ian Harris reports that estimates from 1980 suggested that 63 percent of monks had died or were executed, but "these bald figures shed little light on the factors underlying the deaths. In most cases, we do not know if their end was a direct consequence of their previous monk status."[34]

There was also widespread destruction of Buddhist monasteries; as many as one third of the temples in Cambodia had been damaged in the war, but many were completely destroyed during the DK regime.[35] DK cadre placed explosives to blow up some buildings, or pulled them apart for construction materials. Many other temples were converted for other uses, including storage facilities, prisons, "hospitals," and extermination centers.[36] Buddhist images were smashed, toppled into rivers and swamps, or desecrated in other ways.[37] Henri Locard notes that a DK slogan advised, "if you demolish a statue of the Buddha, you will gain a sack of cement."[38] Buddhist texts were deliberately destroyed, and the devastation was so effective that an estimated 90 percent of Cambodia's Buddhist literary heritage was lost in that span of less than four years.[39]

People were forbidden to conduct religious rituals openly or practice their religious faith. Some people did offer prayers in secret or maintain small shrines within their homes, but no public displays of religious faith were tolerated. The Khmer Rouge also destroyed other religious sites sacred to the majority Buddhist

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[33] Chanthou Boua, "Genocide of a Religious Group: Pol Pot and Cambodia's Buddhist Monks," in *State Organized Terror: The Case of Violent Internal Repression*, ed. P. Timothy Bushness et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 235.

[34] Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 179.

[35] See Charles Keyes, "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia," in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes et al. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), pp. 43–73; and Yang Sam, *Khmer Buddhism and Politics, 1954–1984* (Newington, CT: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987).

[36] Remarkably, some survived nearly untouched. Across the central and southern plains, the destruction seems nearly total, while in certain areas people report many temples intact.

[37] Keyes, "Communist Revolution," and Sam, *Khmer Buddhism*.

[38] Henri Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), p. 171.

[39] Olivier de Bernon, "L'état des biblioteques dans les monasteres du Cambodge," in *The Socio-Cultural Research Congress of Cambodia*, ed. Sorn Samnang (Phnom Penh: University of Phnom Penh, 1998).

population, such as the houses of *neak ta,* territorial guardian spirits, and village ancestral spirits.[40]

In 1978, the DK Minister of Culture, Yun Yat, declared to Yugoslav journalists that, "Buddhism is dead, and the ground had been cleared for the foundations of a new revolutionary culture."[41] All the monks had by this time been disrobed, and Buddhist ritual, which had been at the center of systems of meaning for rural Khmer, had been largely eradicated. People instead were to dedicate themselves to working for the revolution, and admire the Khmer Rouge cadre, whose dedication to the movement inspired a discipline said to be more perfect than that of the monks.[42]

In January 1979, the Vietnamese army ousted the Khmer Rouge and set up a new government headed by DK cadre who had fled to Vietnam and by Khmer revolutionaries who had been in Vietnam since the 1950s. This new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), allowed for the reestablishment of Buddhism, but with important restrictions. Monks from the Theravadin tradition were brought from ethnic Khmer areas of southern Vietnam, and in September of 1979, seven former monks, all of whom had served for between twenty and sixty years, were reordained. The Venerable Tep Vong, the first to be reordained (though he was the youngest), was the senior ranking monk. From late 1979 to late 1981, these monks reestablished the Khmer Sangha by reordaining other former monks. In rural areas, some former monks apparently simply put their robes back on and began performing rituals once again.[43]

The total number of monks in the country in these early years was reported differently in various sources. In 1981, Richardson reported 500 monks and 1,500 novices, and said about 3,000 *wat*s had been restored.[44] David Hawk, in the same year, cited Tep Vong as reporting there were 3,000 monks, of whom 800 had been monks before. But Hawk then received higher figures from provincial authorities, and he speculates that the numbers of younger monks were underreported to central authorities, since ordination was prohibited for those less than fifty years of age.[45]

In 1981, the PRK had placed a series of restrictions on the reestablishment of Buddhism, including the restriction prohibiting men under fifty years old from becoming monks. While visitors like Hawk reported some ordination of younger monks in rural areas, especially if they ordained for short periods on the occasion of the death of a parent, Keyes reported that the overall number of monks was kept quite small throughout the PRK era. Between 1985 and 1989, various sources place

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[40] The Khmer Rouge also set out to destroy other religious faiths practiced by minority populations in the country, including Islam practiced by the Cham people and Christianity, including Catholicism, which was practiced mainly by ethnic Vietnamese. See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); and Ysa Osman, *The Cham Rebellion* (Phnom Penh: The Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006).

[41] Cited in Keyes, "Communist Revolution," p. 58.

[42] Ibid., pp. 57–58; Sam, *Khmer Buddhism,* p. 70; also François Ponchaud, "Social Change in the Vortex of the Revolution," in *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death,* ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book;* Hinton, "Purity and Contamination"; and Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism.*

[43] Sam, *Khmer Buddhism,* p. 80.

[44] Cited in Keyes, "Communist Revolution," p. 61.

[45] David Hawk, "Religion in Kampuchea Today," *WCRP Report on Kampuchea* (New York, NY: World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1981).

the numbers between 6,500 and 8,000 monks, perhaps 10 percent of pre-war numbers.[46] While the government justified this restriction based upon the need for male productive labor, and no doubt the need for soldiers, Keyes argued that the state also likely wanted to prevent the reemergence of the Sangha as an independent institution. He wrote, "Buddhism was still viewed in Marxist terms as having a potential for offering people 'unhealthy beliefs.'"[47]

Other traditional patterns of religious behavior were also restricted. Ian Harris reports that monks, as employees of the state, were required to engage in agricultural labor, something specifically prohibited by their vows. They were also not allowed to go on daily alms rounds, and traditional forms of giving to the temples were discouraged. The rebuilding of temples was carefully regulated, and state-organized management committees oversaw the allocation of donations, directing a portion of these funds to "socially useful purposes," such as the building of schools and clinics.[48] But Harris points out that the laws that kept tight control of the numbers and activities of monks, and on the giving practices of lay people, might very well have been restrictive precisely because those laws were "subverted or ignored."[49] Just as Khmer farmers had quietly begun to ignore the regulations on agricultural production as organized in "solidarity groups" or socialist cooperatives, and returned to independent small-scale agriculture by the mid-1980s,[50] perhaps rural villages had also returned to their traditional religious practices by this time—to the extent that it was possible to do so given their limited financial resources.

Official changes issued from the central level came only in 1988, when the restrictions on ordinations were lifted. Thereafter the number of monks rose rapidly (16,400 in 1990, 50,081 in 1998–99, 55,755 in 2003,[51] and 58,828 in 2005).[52] Religious services began to be broadcast again on the radio. In January 1989, Hun Sen apologized in public speeches for the "government's 'mistakes' towards religion."[53] The leadership of the PRK then began to make public appearances at Buddhist rituals, including the ceremony to enshrine the relic of the Buddha in the Sakyamuni *chetey* (stupa) in front of the train station in April 1989. The government also paid to construct Buddhist monuments at two of the most important sites of Khmer Rouge atrocities: the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes and the Choeung Ek "killing fields." Keyes emphasizes the significance of the fact that the PRK government was taking responsibility not only for the living, but also for the memory of the dead,

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[46] Keyes, "Communist Revolution," p. 62.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 270, citing Heike Loschman; see also Sam, *Khmer Buddhism*, pp. 86–87.

[49] Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 274.

[50] May Ebihara, "'Beyond Suffering': The Recent History of a Cambodian Village," in *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina*, ed. Borje Ljunggren (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, Harvard University Press, 1993).

[51] Ministry of Religion and Cults, "Statistics 1998–1999" (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Religion and Cults, 1999); and Ministry of Religion and Cults, "Statistics 2001–2002" (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Religion and Cults, 2002) (mimeos).

[52] Khy Sovanratana, "Buddhist Education in Contemporary Cambodia: Progress and Challenges," paper presented at the conference Reconfiguring Religion, Power, and Moral Order in Cambodia, Varberg, Sweden, October 1995.

[53] Keyes, "Communist Revolution," p. 62, citing Murry Heibert.

legitimizing their own regime by honoring those killed during the Pol Pot regime in a form that was specifically Buddhist.[54]

Also in April 1989, the National Assembly of the PRK amended the constitution to make Buddhism the state religion. The detested tax on temple donations for state projects was removed;[55] the first *Dhamma-Vinaya* and Pali grammar schools for monks reopened in 1989 and 1990;[56] the Ministry of Cults and Religious affairs was reestablished in 1992; and the Buddhist Institute, which had existed in name only in the 1980s, was reestablished in July 1992.[57]

From the time of the legal changes in 1989 onwards, temples began to be repaired and rebuilt around the country. The political changes meant that a significant number of overseas Khmer were returning from the United States, France, and other countries, and bringing with them funds to donate to temples. Many of these returnees wanted first of all to sponsor ceremonies to make merit for their relatives who had died in the Khmer Rouge period, most of whom had not had the proper religious ceremonies at the time of their death. Some tried to find the bones of their loved ones and paid for the construction of stupas to hold the remains. The newfound prosperity of a small group of wealthy, urban elite, including top political leaders, also began to flow to religious institutions in the form of the sponsorship of religious ceremonies and the rebuilding of temples. The rebuilding of temples is, as Marston points out, considered one of the paramount ways to earn large amounts of merit.[58]

Thus in November 1990, the public performances during the Water Festival must be understood within the context of the reemergence of Buddhism. The SOC leaders were in the midst of a process of "conspicuous ... public piety," what Keyes calls an attempt to build "popular support by becoming, as had kings in the past, conspicuous patrons of Buddhism."[59]

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[54] Ibid., p. 66. It should be noted, however, that these reliquaries are not "traditional" in that the monument at Choeung Ek contains, visible behind glass, the *uncremated* remains of those who were executed there. The monument at Tuol Sleng subsequently collapsed since it was made of wood and never maintained. At the Tuol Sleng Museum, the controversy over a map made of human skulls was only partly resolved in 2002 when the "map" was disassembled and the skulls placed in glass display cases. Many Khmer, including most importantly King Sihanouk, have appealed for the remains to be cremated in accordance with Buddhist tradition. See Judy Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative," *Museum Anthropology* 21,1 (1997): 82–98; Rachel Hughes, "Nationalism and Memory in the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes," in *Contested Pasts*, ed. K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), pp. 175–192; and Thompson, "Buddhism in Cambodia," p. 160–61.

[55] Keyes, "Communist Revolution," p. 63.

[56] Hean Sokhom, "Notes on the Renewal of Khmer Monk Education," *Cambodia Report* II,2 (1996): 14.

[57] Heike Loschmann, "Reestablishing the Buddhist Institute," *Cambodia Report* II,2 (1996): 17.

[58] John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); and John Marston, "Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos," in this volume.

[59] Keyes, "Communist Revolution," pp. 62–63.

THE EVENTS

The program for the events of November 1 and 2, 1990, states that the purpose of holding the festivities is "to implement the political objectives of the party and the state in the matter of protecting and raising up the customs and culture of the people, and to create happiness among the Kampuchean people under the new regime."[60] The events of the first day included boat races on the river in front of the palace in the afternoon and an evening Buddhist ceremony at Wat Unnalaom to prepare for the next day's procession to the Sakyamuni *chetey* in front of the train station. The second day began with the procession through the streets to the park in front of the *chetey* for the planting of a Bodhi tree. The organizing committee president, Chea Sim, planted the tree. There was then an offering of food to 180 monks.

In the afternoon, there were again boat races, and the awarding of prizes to the winners.[61] Then at 6:00 PM, the fireworks began, along with a parade of lighted boats along the river. At 8:00, "national and international guests" began to arrive at the palace, and at 8:15 prayers began, including the taking of the precepts. This was followed by a *Buong Suong* blessing ceremony, the ceremony of the candles, and traditional dance and music by performers from the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture. Then the ceremony of paying homage to the moon and eating *ambok* took place. Throughout the evening, while a relatively small group of people were observing the ceremonies taking place within the palace, performances were under way outside on various street corners near the river. These included musical performances by some of the most popular contemporary bands, including those sponsored by the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture. Thousands of people flocked to watch the fireworks and lighted boats and to enjoy these performances.[62]

The program included a section entitled: "The history of the ceremonies of boat racing, floating lights, paying homage to the moon, and eating *ambok*." According to the program, these ceremonies have been celebrated since ancient times, but were eradicated during the genocidal Pol Pot regime. Now,

> After liberation, on the Seventh of January 1979, when the Angkorean motherland and our Khmer people were restored to life, all customs and practices, religion and national traditions, were restored. Our party, government, and the Front work continuously, vigilantly to insure that every opportunity is

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[60] Department of Religion, Office of the National Front for the Solidarity, Building, and Defense of the Kampuchean Motherland, *Pithi Bon Om Touk Bantaet Bratip Sampeah Preah Khae ak Ambok Danghaer ning Damdaoem pothi preuk* (Phnom Penh: Office of the National Front for the Solidarity, Building, and Defense of the Kampuchean Motherland, 1990), p. 1. The program is modeled on earlier prerevolutionary forms from the 1950s and 60s. While these earlier versions usually contain a schedule of the events, dress code, and locations, only the 1959 version contains an explanation of the meaning of the events. This is provided in French and English, apparently for tourists. See Ministry of Information, *La Fête du Retrait des Eaux* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Information, 1959). I would like to thank Pic Bunnin, the director of the Buddhist Institute Library, for helping me locate these early programs.

[61] In fact, the races were so popular that they were extended to a third day.

[62] These crowds were notable for the time, given restrictions on movements in the countryside and the fact that some people were deterred from attending for fear of violence. In 2002, after a decade of freedom of travel and four years of complete peace in the country, an estimated two million people came from the countryside to Phnom Penh for the Water Festival. Charlotte McDonald-Gibson and Lon Nara, "Festival Time," *Phnom Penh Post*, November 22–December 5, 2002, p. 16.

> available for laypeople and monks widely and openly to preserve and respect religious practices according to religious beliefs and national traditions. In this year of the horse, BE 2534, AD 1990, our party, government, and the Front are enthusiastic and delighted to have been able to arrange the celebration of these three ceremonies discussed above so that the people, the Buddhist faithful, can enjoy the celebration of their national traditions.[63]

The history of the boat races emphasizes that, during the Angkorean period, Kampuchea had a great naval force, as is documented by temple bas-relief images. In particular, mention is made of Jayavarman VII, and the defeat of Cham enemies by his naval forces. Citing documents from the Buddhist Institute library,[64] the history section notes the navy of King Ang Chan, who protected the provinces of Kampuchea Krom with three types of boats. At this time of year, at the full moon of the month of *Kattek*, in the season of eating *ambok*, the ministers of the four directions would assemble the navy and army to train for one day and one night.[65] The main point of the essay is that Cambodians, and particularly the leaders of the current government, are heirs to a long heritage of superior military skill, passed on continuously since ancient times.

The third point in this section notes that the ceremony is similar to seasonal ceremonies held elsewhere in the world, including Europe. The ceremonies honor the debt of merit that is owed to the *Preah Kongkear*, the spirit of the river, and to *Preah Thorani*, the goddess of the earth, who together maintain all life by restoring the fertility of the earth through the annual flooding. The program notes, however, that this ritual activity is really about the scientific realities of the annual flooding cycle and its effects on the lives of farmers.

The history given of the custom of floating the lights makes reference to several religious sites and temples, noting that the ceremony honors Preah Karikum Kaev in the world of the nagas and the buddhas at these aforementioned sites.[66] While the program does not provide an exact history, it emphasizes the fact that Buddhist texts are the source for the origins of the practice and that the performance of the ceremony produces good fortune for the people and for the nation.

The history of the custom of paying homage to the moon and eating *ambok* tells the story of a Bodhisattva (*Pothisatv*), from the *Jātaka* tales (the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha), who is born as a rabbit. This rabbit offers himself up as food to a Brahmin, who is Indra in disguise. Since the Brahmin cannot take a life, the rabbit

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[63] Department of Religion, *Pithi Bon Om Touk*, p. 6.

[64] The Buddhist Institute Library had not yet been re-established at this point, though some books previously printed by the Buddhist Institute were available at the National Library.

[65] Department of Religion, *Pithi Bon Om Touk*, pp. 7–9.

[66] I was unable to locate a further elaboration of this reference. The only history I was able to find regarding the floating of lights tells of two white crows that lost five eggs, each of which was found and protected by a different animal. Human children hatched out of the eggs and were raised by their respective animal parents. As adults, they all became monks and found each other again, eventually discovering the identities of their true parents. Because these five orphans cannot return to care for their parents, the offerings given over to the water are *puja* in honor of their parents. This article does also note that there are at least two other explanations for the source of this practice. See Pich Sal et al., *Reuang preng teak tong neung tumniem tomloab khmaer* (Folktales related to Khmer customs) (Phnom Penh: n.p., 1994), pp. 142–46. (The title page bears the imprint of the Buddhist Institute, but this reprint is authorized by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts; no date of original publication is given.)

leaps into the fire to kill himself. In a further act of piety, he first rolls on the ground to remove any insects. But Indra magically saves him and raises up his image to the moon, which is why Khmer see the image of a rabbit on the full moon.[67] This is why, the program concludes, Khmer make offerings of *ambok* and bananas to the full moon during the month of *Kattek*.

In this official history of these annual ceremonies, explanation of one of the crucial parts of the ritual sequence is omitted. The program does not offer a description or history of the ritual of the lighting of candles and the study of the pattern of the wax dripping to predict the rainfall patterns across the country for the coming year—though this was surely the crucial feature of the festival for rural rice growers.

This particular ceremony was previously held annually in the palace, presided over by the king and performed by a Brahmin, though it had not been conducted since the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in 1970.[68] Candles, one for every province, are placed in a row on a piece of wood or bamboo and lit. The wood is then turned so the candles drip wax on a length of banana leaf underneath. The person officiating then interprets the drippings and makes predictions for rainfall prospects for each of the provinces for the coming year. As the candles are being lit, prayers are offered for abundant rains.[69] During this ritual in 1990, the ceremony was performed by an official from the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture, who, I was told at the time, was of the lineage of Brahmins who had served Khmer kings in the past. The following year, the newly returned Prince Sihanouk would preside over the performance of the ritual.[70] Olivier de Bernon notes that it was after the return of the king in 1991 that the descendents of the *bakou*, or palace Brahmins who had served in the old regime, were found and brought back into service in the palace.[71]

In 1990, the organizers might have wished to play down who was performing and officiating at this modified, previously royal, sacred ceremony. However, one did not need to be either royal or Brahmin to perform the candle ceremony per se. In fact, the handbook on royal ceremonies that describes the performance of the ritual in 1958 by King Suramarit specifically notes that there is little difference between the ceremonies in the palace and those conducted among the people.[72]

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[67] This is essentially the same story provided as a source for the custom in Pich Sal, et al., *Reuang preng*. These authors add that the foods that are eaten at this celebration—*ambok*, tubers, and taro—are all favorite foods of the rabbit. Pich Sal et al., *Reuang preng*, pp. 145–46.

[68] See ibid., p. 141; and Chap Pin, ed., *Preah Reach Pithi Tvear Tossameas*, vol. 3 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1960), pp. 119–30.

[69] Chap Pin, *Preah Reach Pithi*, p. 127.

[70] Marie Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 288.

[71] Olivier de Bernon, "À propos du retour des bakous dans le Palais royal de Phnom Penh," *Renouveaux religieux en Asie* (Paris: EFEO, 1997). De Bernon notes the performance of the ceremony at the Water Festival in 1994 by the new, reorganized corps of *bakou* (p. 33). De Bernon's piece discusses the return of the *bakou* to palace service, including the fact that only fragments remain of the texts that had previously been used, which in any case the surviving *bakou* are unable to understand.

[72] Chap Pin, *Preah Reach Pithi*, p. 128; see also Ministry of Information, *La Fête*.

The ceremony using candles to predict the rains is performed on this important ritual occasion in many parts of rural Cambodia.[73] Solieng Mak reports that the ceremony is still performed in Sophy village in Kompong Speu province.[74] Three rituals are held together: "*bon ak ambok, sampeah preah khae,* and *samrak tien,*" which she translates as "starch rice," "moon praying," and "rain prediction." They are held on the full moon night of the month of *Kattek,* and the "aim of the whole ceremony is to give thanks to the land, water, and environment, and to predict next year's rainfall pattern."[75] The ceremony starts at midnight (though Mak reports that it started a bit earlier); the *achar* and two other men light three sacred candles of pure beeswax.[76] The three candles represent the three neighboring districts of Longvek, Samrong Tong, and Phnom Srouch. The wax-dripping patterns are read by interpreting shapes: for example, the figure of a gun means war, a good pile of candle wax means good harvest, and a figure of a rat means rat infestation. Mak says that in 1993 when she witnessed the ceremony, the prediction was for less rain in her district, news that might prompt the farmers to use some irrigation. That year did indeed bring drought; she said the prediction was "close to reality," though not entirely accurate. She emphasized that those farmers still make decisions, such as what rice varieties to grow, based upon these predictions. She recommends that the process receive further study.[77]

In Svay village, in southern Kandal province, a village elder also reported that the candle ceremony had been held annually until 2002.[78] Here, too, three candles were used, to predict rainfall in Kandal Stoeng district, Bati district to the south, and north towards Phnom Penh. The ceremony was not held in 2003, as the *achar* who used to conduct it had recently died.[79]

In Sambo village in Kompong Thom province, Navuth Chay records the celebration of the ceremony, which he translates as "the full moon sacred candle dripping festival." Here the ceremony uses twelve candles, representing the twelve months of the year, which are kneaded into six candles, one for each of the six rainy months of the year. The candles are attached to a length of bamboo, to which are also fixed two clusters of incense sticks. This more complicated arrangement reflects the fact that Sambo villagers grow more than one kind of rice each year, and use the

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[73] Leclère has a description of the ceremony as it was performed in the nineteenth century; he notes that the ritual is certainly of Brahmanic origin and resembles a festival held in India in honor of Lakshmi. The participants asked the moon to "be our protectress." Adhémard Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899), pp. 377–79.

[74] Solieng Mak, "Rainfed Lowland Rice Farming in Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, University of Western Sydney-Hawkesbury, 1997), p. 145.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid. Mak uses the word "priest," which I take to mean *achar,* or Buddhist lay officiant, who is reported to conduct the ritual in other places.

[77] Ibid., pp. 147–48.

[78] This is the village where May Ebihara conducted ethnographic research in 1959–60 and again in the 1990s, near the border of Kandal and Takeo provinces. Dr. Ebihara said that she did not remember the ceremony being performed in that year (personal communications), but in Meach Pon's research on the ceremony in Takeo province, he notes that temples in an area will often rotate holding the ceremony over a number of years, to ensure large crowds. See Meach Pon, *Brapeini ning tumniem tomloab khmaer* (Khmer Customs and Traditions) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), p. 276.

[79] Fieldnotes, 2003.

incense sticks also to predict the outcome of the rice harvest in their upland fields. The pattern of the drippings on the banana leaf, as well as the manner in which the wax drips, will predict not only the rainfall amounts, but also related natural disasters. The burning of the incense sticks predicts how well the upland fields will "fire" when the downed forest cover is burned away.[80] The villagers reported to Chay, as they had to Mak, that they use the predictions to guide agricultural decision-making for the coming year. For rural farmers, the candle ceremony is still considered important for predicting rainfall patterns.

There is another aspect of the celebrations that the official program does not mention, and that was not evident at the formal ceremony at the "former" Royal Palace that night in 1990: in the village versions of these rituals, the communal preparation and eating of the *ambok* was traditionally an occasion for great fun and flirting among young people. Meach Pon, in his book on Khmer customs and traditions, describes the *"bon moha ambok"* as it was previously celebrated in Takeo province.[81] He notes that the ritual process involved the whole community making the *ambok* together, pounding the rice grains and frying the flakes, all to the cadence of the sounding of a gong. Then when the *ambok* is ready, young women will try to feed it to the young men, stuffing it in their mouths, while yelling, "are you full?" Since the mouths of the young men are stuffed with the dry *ambok*, they cannot answer and the girls will thus try to feed them even more, all the while laughing and joking. The girls will also ask, "Will there be rain this year or not?"—*"phlieng ru min phlieng?"* As when games between teams of young men and women are played at Khmer New Years, this game provides direct physical contact between young men and women who are otherwise traditionally kept at a discreet distance.[82] But Meach Pon reports that this custom is dying out in Takeo and exists now only in the memories of those sixty-years old or older.[83]

The elder from Svay reported that the *ambok* ceremony in her village had also stopped in the last couple of years (she explained that in Svay they prepared the *ambok* in advance of the celebration). She remembered fondly the ceremonies when she was young, when the young people would flirt, feeding the *ambok* to the young men and asking, *"phlieng"* or *"reang,"* rain or dry? The villagers would bring certain foods—tubers and taro and bananas—as well as *ambok*, the foods noted in the story above as those preferred by the rabbit.

Thus two of the most important functions of these rural ceremonies—paying homage to the moon and eating *ambok*—were to predict rainfall and to stage a communal event that would allow young people to flirt and have fun. Certainly

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[80] Navuth Chay, "Society and Culture in a Village in Central Cambodia" (MA thesis, Waseda University, 2002), p. 38–39.

[81] Meach Pon, *Brapeini ning tumniem*. Meach Pon's article was reprinted, without any citation or credit, by the popular woman's magazine *Kulthida* in the November 2001 edition, pp. 30–31. They added pictures of several young women gleefully trying to stuff *ambok* into the mouth of a young man.

[82] Leclère reported that after the ceremony there were "popular games": "I have been told that in the course of this festival, tender words are uttered and love pledges exchanged, the moon being taken as witness and made keeper of the vow." Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme*, p. 379.

[83] Meach Pon, *Brapeini ning tumniem*, p. 284.

there were always differences between rural performances and state-sponsored ceremonies, with the former allowing for more frivolity.[84]

The ceremony at the palace in 1990 included performances of classical Khmer dance and music. The dances were from the Khmer classical repertoire, including dances that would have been performed in the palace for royalty during the pre-war years. The dances performed that night included traditional forms that were only just beginning to be performed again after the withdrawal of Vietnamese advisors. When the PRK regime governed, the arts had served the propaganda interests of the state, and dances were devoted to communicating direct political messages rather than performing classical forms.[85] Here the traditional (royal) dances were allowed in a new context.

Analysis: Why Did They Hold the Events?

By sponsoring these events, the leaders of the SOC were asserting their legitimacy as the rulers of Cambodia—in the context of the launching of the new State of Cambodia—to their rivals in the other factions and to the international community, as well as to the population that they governed inside the country. They were seizing control of the right to declare the meaning of the three key cultural symbols of what it means to be Cambodian, the words that would become the national slogan of the new Kingdom of Cambodia: Nation, Religion, and King.

Nation

First, Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin used the occasion to declare that they were nationalists, and, even more basically, that they were Khmer. This was a direct effort to cleanse themselves of ten years of association with the occupying Vietnamese army. The meaning of the boat races, as explained in the program text, focused on a national legacy of successful naval warfare, and while this could be taken to be directed at their military adversaries in the resistance, the historical victories mentioned are those that defeated enemies from the east. By noting that Cambodia had ruled the lower Mekong delta as recently as the time of Ang Chan, the SOC rulers were comparing themselves to rulers who had stood up to the Vietnamese.

They were announcing publicly that now that the Vietnamese were gone, "we Khmer" could go back to doing things the Khmer way. This discourse would have had a particular appeal to those in the border camps and among the Khmer overseas who were convinced that their country suffered from "Vietnamization." Through a series of visits to France and the US, the SOC leadership had embarked on a campaign to appeal directly to overseas Khmer; this process involved accepting several transnational returnees into the SOC government.[86] The program makes this

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[84] On the shift from boisterous ceremonies in Northeast Thailand to forms of more staid state-controlled Thai Buddhism from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, see Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

[85] Toni Shapiro, "Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1994).

[86] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 284–86.

nationalist pitch in several ways, first in its specific appeals to Khmer history and the fact that the boat races date back to Angkorian times. In this regard, it is interesting to note that they make the connection not only to the glories of Angkor (the ultimate symbol of Khmer national identity), but specifically to Jayavarman VII, the quintessential Khmer king.[87] As Benedict Anderson, O. W. Wolters, and others have noted for other societies in Southeast Asia, claiming power involves stating not only your connections to previous rulers, but to the most powerful of former rulers.[88]

The dancers and other performers from the Ministry of Propaganda and Fine Arts (soon to change to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) were clearly delighted to be able, once again, to do things the Khmer way. Gottesman notes that the PRK had faced a fundamental dilemma with regard to the revival of traditional cultural forms. While such a revival was generally supported by Khmer, especially educated Khmer, and it could help combat their image as puppets of the Vietnamese, "so much of what Cambodians thought of as their cultural heritage reminded them of Sihanouk and the royalist movement against which the PRK was struggling militarily and politically."[89] Now the performers were relieved of the obligation to convey exclusively anti-West, anti-royal, anti-coalition propaganda and could return to performances of the beloved Khmer classical dance.

As nationalists, the three SOC leaders also wanted to present themselves as united, a show of solidarity in the face of swirling rumors that internal divisions threatened the party. It was imperative that they show the resistance factions that they would not let any internal differences affect their solidarity in the face of the returnees, and indeed this show of solidarity has helped maintain their strength in the years since.

Holding the boat races also symbolized national unity by bringing together competing teams from around the country—though in this first year of the revived races not all provinces were represented. The competition also brought together crowds of people from around the country, a situation heretofore impossible since the PRK had limited internal travel to prevent infiltration by the resistance forces. The candles used in the ceremony represented each province, and the predictions of the rains were national, rather than local or regional, as in rural versions of the ceremony. Taken together, these ritual elements orchestrated and conveyed a sense of a reunited and rededicated kingdom to the population.

Religion

The SOC leaders were proclaiming through the planting of the Bodhi tree and the palace rituals, as with the installation of the relic in the Sakyamuni *chetey* the year before, that they were Buddhists. This meant most importantly that they were not Khmer Rouge, the notorious infidels who had deliberately tried to destroy religion.

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[87] See Charles Keyes, "The Legacy of Angkor," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14,3 (1990): 56–59; and Penny Edwards, "Imagining the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse before and during the UNTAC Period," in *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia*, ed. Steve Heder and Judy Ledgerwood (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 50–72.

[88] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures of Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 17–77; and O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

[89] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 218.

Much of PRK/SOC propaganda for a decade had focused on the fact that the population owed a debt to the PRK for literally saving their lives in the face of DK genocide, while blaming the horrors of the DK on the "Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan genocidal clique." While many PRK leaders, including the top three, had served in the DK regime, and they claimed the victory over the American imperialists and Lon Nol in 1975 as their own, their legitimacy lay in having saved the Khmer people from the DK. Appeals to the Buddhist notion of a debt owed (*kun*) has been a major theme in CPP campaigns through all of the national elections since 1993.

Further, by lifting state restrictions on religious practice in 1989, the SOC leadership had already learned how enthusiastically the people welcomed a return to full state support for Buddhism. The program notes that the party, the government, and the Front work hard to make it possible for the people to practice their religion; indeed, in the program, they take credit for supporting religion throughout the PRK. Hun Sen's remarkable apology in 1989, when he confessed to having made mistakes with regard to religion, shows the SOC's need to rally the people's support during election campaigns by presenting themselves as devout Buddhists. In 1990, the leadership had already begun to support the reconstruction of certain temples.[90]

The entire ceremony—and in particular the lighting of the candles—is conducted to invoke the gods, the *devata*, the gods of Brahmanism, the buddhas, and bodhisattvas to intervene and provide Cambodia with the rains so crucial for the growing of rice, the staple food.[91] The livelihood of the people depends on the answering of these prayers. The rulers establish their legitimacy by performing the ritual and thus demonstrating that they act in harmony with the natural world; their missive to the gods brings the rain, the floodwaters, the fish, the fertility, and the harvest.

I do not mean to suggest that Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen literally believed that by performing the ceremony they would bring the rains and restore fertility. Perhaps that is why the program does not play up this aspect of the two-day event (one witness to the ceremony clearly remembers Hun Sen trying to hurry along this part of the festivities).[92] But there is evidence that Khmer farmers in rural communities still trust in the predictions and the efficacy of ritual action. Residents of rural communities were able to convince two young Khmer academic researchers that the ceremony was effective, or at least that its effectiveness "required additional study."[93]

The program also links the celebrations to scientific, rational, "modern" facts about the annual flooding, the reversal of the river, and the replenishing of the fertility of the soil. While the program states that the Water Festival rituals are conducted to offer thanks to Preah Kongkear and Preah Thorani, the spirit of the river and the goddess of the earth, it goes on to explain that this event "reflects the

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[90] By the 2003 election, the image of the CPP as the "Party of Buddhism" was central to their reelection campaign. Fieldnotes, 2003.

[91] Ministry of Information, *La Fête*, pp. 126–27.

[92] One of the other foreigners present in 1990, Australian ethnomusicologist William Lobban, remembers that Hun Sen became impatient waiting for the candles to drip and ordered the Brahmin to cut it short and get on with the "reading" (personal communication).

[93] See Mak, "Rainfed Lowland Rice Farming"; and Chay, "Society and Culture."

actual characteristics of the geography and the way of life of the farmers who live along the river."[94] The socialist literary forms of the previous ten years of PRK rule were heavily steeped in such appeals to realism. This section of the program also notes that the ceremony is similar to one performed in Europe, making a link to the West and therefore to "modernity."

The leadership appealed to Buddhist beliefs by invoking one other theme. The SOC leadership recognized the potency among their citizenry of millennial ideas about a coming change of leadership in the aftermath of the devastation predicted in the *Putth Tumneay*. The various versions of the *Putth Tumneay* discuss a time of terrible death and destruction, characterized by inversions of the social hierarchy: children will not respect their parents, students will not respect their teachers; "the gourd sinks and the broken pot floats," the text predicts; and the evil, ignorant, infidels will come to rule the land. By openly sponsoring Buddhism and Buddhist ritual activity, leaders of the SOC clearly meant to distance themselves from communism, since they understood that the people knew communists to be infidels, non-believers. This characterization of communists as the evil infidels predicted in the texts was most commonly made with reference to the Khmer Rouge, but also to the Vietnamese.

The *Putth Tumneay* predictions had a particular resonance in that year, 1990, the year of the horse. In certain versions of the text, the year of the horse and the next one, the year of the sheep, are said to mark a transition, following which there will be one more brief period of conflict, "crossing a field of white" (i.e., bones), before it is time for the coming of the *Preah Bat Dhammik*, the righteous savior predicted in the texts.[95] While the three SOC leaders might not have been trying to claim (at this stage)[96] to be the savior(s) noted in the text, they most assuredly did not want to be seen as the infidels whose decline and demise were imminent. The goal was to show that the transition was complete, that order and social hierarchy already had been restored, with them situated in their rightful place at the top.

King

Finally, it is with regard to the notion of kingship that the reestablishment of the festivities is most ambiguous. On the one hand, the holding of a royal ceremony in the "former" royal palace in the midst of negotiations with the former king could be taken as a direct affront, the message being: If you do not complete the negotiations and return, we are capable of proceeding without you. On the other hand, the

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[94] Department of Religion, *Pithi Bon Om Touk*, pp. 9–10.

[95] As I wrote this article in 2002, we were again at the crucial point in the twelve-year cycle when the coming of the *Preah Bat Dhammik* was at hand. There are a significant number of millennial movements that are linked to waiting for the arrival of this just and righteous ruler and the period of peace and prosperity that his reign will herald. Some of these movements are linked to building projects, as noted by John Marston, "Clay into Stone: A Modern-Day Tapas," in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 170–96; and Marston, "Constructing Narratives of Order," in this volume.

[96] During the outbreak of violence between the royalists and CPP in 1997, Hun Sen referred to a line of the text on television, apparently trying to cast himself as the *Preah Bat Dhammeuk*. See Elizabeth Moorthy, "'Cooking the Shrimp is Past' ... What Next?" *Phnom Penh Post*, August 29–September 11, 1997, p. 1.

reestablishment of the festival could also be read as an invitation to the former king: Return now and everything can be as it was before ... we will allow the monarchy to resemble its previous form.

Even without reference to the former king, in the face of his looming return, the three former communist leaders were, I would argue, making the case that order had already been successfully wrested out of chaos, and thus they had already assumed the mantle of the just king themselves. The prospect of these three SOC leaders performing a royal ceremony recalls Chandler's cultural analysis of historical materials from the nineteenth century. Like the composition and chanting of the text Chandler describes in the "Songs" piece, and the performance of ceremonies in the historical chronicles of King Duong, the celebration of the ceremony in 1990 was about the ritual recreation of social hierarchy in the aftermath of the devastation of Khmer Rouge rule and the civil war that followed. In the nineteenth century, after the devastation of war, examples of orderliness, Chandler writes, such as "an elegant ceremony, a design in silk, or a properly chanted poem," would have been few and far between. Sponsoring the events was a way for the SOC leadership to demonstrate that they were capable and willing to recreate the old social order—on their own terms—through social activities and ritual performances. In form it was, literally, the way that things had been done before.

Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin were seeking to enact, however uncomfortably, a series of actions and a ritual activity that would appeal to a Khmer public that was still (to varying degrees) steeped in a tradition of celebrating hierarchical arrangements of leadership tied to the public demonstration of political, economic, and religious efficacy. They were demonstrating that there was an established political order, as per Khmer tradition, even if they were not royalty. Marie Martin, writing in early 1990, suggested that the Khmer population was favorably inclined towards the recent withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and the redistribution of land to private owners (as they were to the new freedom of religion). She writes,

> Khmers are likely to accept favorably these two positive reforms, even if offered by someone other than the god-king. The main point is to survive by adapting traditions to the requirements of the new political power and, if peace lasts, the Khmer will be grateful to those who know how to preserve it, allowing the population to live decently.[97]

The SOC leaders demonstrated that they were in control and capable of providing order by carrying out the festivities without any social disruptions or violence. The resistance had exploded a couple of devices in central Phnom Penh in 1989, but nothing spoiled the evening for the crowds who took to the streets these two days in November 1990. Rowers of the boats and those who came to watch had been able to travel and enjoy the festivities in safety.

The funds spent for such an event was also a display of economic power. In this period, when the city electrical supply was irregular, inflation was rampant, the top elite still drove around in Russian Ladas, and most people still rode bicycles, spending on brightly lit boats and fireworks showed that the state did have some resources at its disposal. Chandler's work emphasizes the linkage between

[97] Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, p. 20.

possessions, particularly those that are bestowed by and received from a ruler, and the legitimacy of one's authority. "Propriety" and "property" are directly linked, with good rulers making merit by distributing wealth and titles to their subjects.

This transition period in 1990 was clearly marked by just such a distribution of titles and property. As Gottesman points out, the SOC regime was busy dividing up state assets, a process that helped to ensure loyalty within the party and among state workers who received a share, while preempting attempts by the returning resistance politicians to gain access to the resources or use pre-1979 ownership as a campaign issue.[98] High-ranking officials received property in the city that they could use to generate personal income. Regular Cambodian citizens were also being told that they had regained ownership of their land, a factor that was to prove crucial for CPP support in rural areas in the 1993 election.[99]

The year 1990 also marked the beginning of a new period characterized by ostentatious displays of wealth, and the public distribution of gifts by the ruling party, which were meant to establish the core legitimacy of the CPP, and, in particular, of Hun Sen. These activities, of course, echoed the elaborate public displays by Prince Sihanouk in the 1960s, when he would travel to the countryside, often by helicopter, to hand out gifts to his "children." In the post-1993 Kingdom of Cambodia, the new CPP elite mimic this pattern, proving their political "prowess"[100] by returning a portion of their wealth directly to the people through building schools, sponsoring ceremonies, and passing out sarongs and packets of MSG to crowds of rural poor. Such distributions are the public media face of Cambodian politics today, the main focus of television "news."

Discussing King Duong's reign, Chandler also notes how the reestablishment of royal legitimacy was linked to changes in "linguistic etiquette," as the king changed proper forms of address in recognition of new status among those he favored. Marston has studied the ways that changes in language during the transition period between regimes are linked to forms of social hierarchy.[101] The SOC reinstated the use of certain titles, and took for themselves, as political elites, the title *Samdech*. This title previously had been commonly used for royalty and was a term of endearment for King Sihanouk among the rural masses, who referred to him as *Samdech Ov* or "Papa Prince."[102] Other titles previously issued by kings, including "*Oknha*," reappear as commodities. Differences in status among the masses also reflect this new acknowledgement of social differences, as the term "comrade" disappeared and

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[98] Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 318–19.

[99] It would turn out that these papers were not formal titles to the land, but only notices that title had been applied for. Today some two-thirds of rural farmers do not have proper title to their land, a fact that is sometimes exploited by local or military authorities out to grab land for themselves.

[100] Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*.

[101] Marston, *Cambodia 1991–1994*.

[102] The 1967 Buddhist Institute Dictionary also notes the use of the term to refer to the Supreme Patriarch of the order of Buddhist Monks as well as royalty. The term is applied to a person of great power, a person of merit (*neak mean bon*), *Vacananukram Khmae* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute [1938] 1967), p. 1317.

old titles such as *"lok"* (sir) and *Ek Uttam* (Your Excellency) have been reestablished.[103]

Most importantly, the CPP leadership was successful at claiming to have restored Buddhism. The CPP has outstripped the Royalist FUNCINPEC (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacifique, et Cooperátif, National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) party to become the major benefactor of important temples in and near Phnom Penh since the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993.[104] Just as "gifts" have flowed directly from individual politicians to rural people, so, too, the money has flowed from CPP leaders directly to individual temples and monks, mostly for building projects. The Ministry of Religion and Cults and the educational system for monks remain dramatically underfunded and tightly controlled. The role of primary donors is therefore significant. While formerly the king and his party were the chief supporters of religion, this role has largely been usurped by the CPP leadership, those who have the money to make large donations and therefore to make merit.[105]

Hun Sen, in particular, has made gestures in the years since 1990 that suggest he sees himself more as "king" than "strongman." In the 2003 election, he said that he would not campaign, but would keep himself neutral and above politics, imitating the political status of King Sihanouk. At the new airport terminal building, Hun Sen erected a stone inscription taking credit for the construction of that new complex. In 2003, he released a statement to the press denying that he was a reincarnation of Jayavarman VII, and that, in fact, he was not of royal lineage. The statement said that it was necessary to issue the denial because so many people were confused and thought that, in fact, he *was* Jayavarman VII returned.[106]

Over the course of the twelve-year cycle and beyond since the last year of the horse, the leadership of the CPP has been very successful at retaining power. They were able to retain control over most decision-making processes and resources. Yet they do not entirely control the meaning of key cultural concepts in quite the same way as they could in 1990, when they still had a monopoly on power. Competing voices have emerged, not least among them those of the once—and for a time, again—king, Norodom Sihanouk, and his son King Norodom Sihamoni, who seek to offer their own definitions of nation, religion, and kingship. But given the CPP's continued near-monopoly over the state bureaucracy and the broadcast media, theirs is still the clearest voice, particularly as it reaches into the countryside.

The SOC/CPP leaders were successful in their bid to claim legitimacy by acting as kings, ceremonially and politically, while the negotiations for a settlement were still underway. They took these actions before the return of the former king, forestalling his claims to authority. They acted to seize the authority and power to define the key cultural symbols of nation, religion, and king to their own advantage.

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[103] A renaming of places also occurs at this time. Streets in Phnom Penh that were previously named for royalty, and which during the socialist period were renamed to honor anti-French resistance/millenarian figures, have been rechristened with their original royal names.

[104] Elizabeth Guthrie, "Buddhist Temples and Cambodian Politics," in *People and the 1998 National Elections in Cambodia*, ed. John L. Vijghen (Phnom Penh: Experts for Community Research, 2002), pp. 59–74.

[105] See the discussion by Christine Gray describing how Thai banks took on the role of major donor in Thailand, thereby preempting the monarchy. Christine Gray, "Hegemonic Images: Language and Silence in the Royal Thai Polity," *Man* 26 (1991): 43–65.

[106] Fieldnotes, 2003.

Part of the beauty of Chandler's original "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" essay was that he argued that there were two contrasting perceptions of moral order in nineteenth-century Cambodia. These were not the perceptions of the powerful as opposed to the powerless, or of the literate verses the illiterate; rather, the first was a "celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good" and "the second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on."[107] The audience listening to the chanting of the text in 1856 could share in the understanding of (or hope for) Cambodia as a recreated set of hierarchical relationships that would provide them with security and prosperity. But they also lived with the memories of a time of death and destruction, when the very model itself had been called into question. They had crossed over the boundary between the forest and field and back again; they had to find a way to live in the darkness at the edge of the forest. Maybe the Khmer rural population today is willing to accept the "shade" of the CPP reign as the best shelter they can find—the restoration of an imperfect order in an imperfect world.

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[107] Chandler, "Songs," p. 97.

IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS WITH MOTHERS ABOUT DEATH

Erik W. Davis

David Chandler's "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" still exerts a powerful influence on discussions of Khmer culture and the boundary it draws between the civilized and the savage.[1] Chandler emphasizes the Khmer words *srok* and *prei*, traditionally paired terms translatable variously as "field and forest," "civilized and savage," "wild and domesticated." His concern was with the performance of shared notions of social order, as expressed at the margins—of violence, document, and scholarship. The imaginative mode of scholarship leading to "Songs" is one of Cambodian studies' surest lures and rewards. Most of us leave the essay with new insight into the shared world of Khmer culture, and occasionally into the existence of our own as well.

Chandler described the occult connections between three very different documents—folktales about girls who transform into birds, a monk-eating crocodile, and a family history. Chandler both represented and created an image of a shared universe out of his analysis of these scattered, non-canonical sources. He instituted a related set of concerns, symbols, and texts, shared by those who follow in his wake.

I hope to illuminate a specific set of concerns from within this shared universe, which I will refer to as the imaginary, a term discussed below. Regarding the specific symbols I examine here, I argue that symbols of motherhood, sustenance, and death compose a remarkably stable part of the Khmer imaginary, representing hierarchy, dependency, and a possible escape from a dominated dependency.

In writing this essay, I often engaged in conversations with an imaginary Chandler.[2] As a result, there is a way in which this work is not entirely mine, no

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[1] David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays, 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996). I thank Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood for inviting me to write this piece and for their guidance; my debts to David Chandler and Steven Collins should be clear within the text. Others who generously assisted with various aspects of this essay are Heng Chhun Ouern, Alex van der Haven, Alexandra Kent, Richard O'Connor, and Trent Walker. I am grateful to all of them, though every error is mine. This is for the mothers and children in my own life, who are multiple, and "good."

[2] This imaginary David began appearing shortly after I read "Songs" and now shares cramped headspace with a motley crew of characters. There is obviously no necessary relationship with

matter how much a part I may have played in realizing it. Rather, it emerged from conversations with a David founded at a particular moment in his own thought.

The girls in the *"Kaun Lok"* story transform into birds; Chandler also employs metaphors of flying and settling. I remember him describe Paul Mus—one of his own intellectual parents—"taking flight" as he lectured. Then a couple of years ago we had the misfortune to attend the funeral of a mutual friend; he described the occasion as "soaring," which captured the evident care of a local and rooted community suddenly on full display in the preparation of a beautifully conceived funeral. The word was poetically adequate to both the beauty of the day and the pain of shared loss.

What animates "Songs" is the relationship between an idea of a shared hierarchical community, and concern about the wildness within and without ourselves, all of which is represented in the images of the civilized field and the savage forest. Chandler wrote that the three texts he analyzed were part of a single moral order—a Cambodian way of thinking about morality and society—shared by all, rather than the perceptions of an ideal world as represented by only one group of Cambodians.

> They were not, as one might expect, perceptions on the part of those in power *versus* perceptions of the powerless, or perceptions of people who could read *versus* those of people who could not. Rather, there was a moral order for everyone—or at least those reachable by texts of this kind—based on prescription, memorization, and teaching, largely Buddhist in orientation, on the one hand, and on perceptions rooted in the real world, on the other. The first was a celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good. The second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on.[3]

This is a classic example of hegemonic ideology: this single moral order presents a particular view of the world as the only viable one, and effectively recruits others to share in it.[4] But Chandler does not appear to have characterized this Khmer moral order as "hegemonic." He seems instead to ask more imaginative and empathetic questions: How does it feel when you've lost the world you knew along with the hierarchies that created it? How does it feel, also, when others start recreating those hierarchies and networks, after a period in which they were destroyed?

Such questions manifest in "Songs" in part because Chandler discusses a historical moment when a strong hegemony had been uprooted by massive violent change. There may be joy and relief that one can return to former patterns of life after the violence has ended. But Chandler hinted at other responses as well. He focused on a period when, during a respite between the violent disruptions of warfare, people began to reinstitute and celebrate old Cambodian hierarchies. As a result,

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the real David Chandler, whom I will continue referring to as Chandler. The two Davids very likely disagree on many things, or would if they ever met. Both Davids, however, are generously assisting a continuing folklore project at the Buddhist Institute.

[3] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 97.

[4] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1972); and Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983).

some would rise and others would fall. It is unlikely all rejoiced at the reinstatement of old relationships. The historical document Chandler examined in "Songs"—a family history—celebrated a social order in which that family occupied a lofty position. In contrast, the two folktales were far more ambiguous regarding the value of hierarchy.

When Chandler rewrote "Songs" in 1982, Cambodia still smelled of disruptive violence: the iron taste of blood and artillery shells hung in the air following a civil war, the state-sponsored nightmare of Democratic Kampuchea, and the déjà vu of another violent liberation, this time courtesy of the Vietnamese army.

Chandler was concerned in "Songs" with the imagination of real cultures and people, that is, with the ways in which people lived their lives. People grow up and live within a shared culture, and are naturally influenced and constrained by its possibilities and stated norms. People are not only influenced by their cultures, however, but may also act creatively upon them. Such interaction takes place through representation, which I discuss as the power of the imaginary.

THE IMAGINARY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Scholars of Buddhism have recently begun to use the idea of the imaginary in their work.[5] My use of the concept follows that of Cornelius Castoriadis and refers to both the individual and social creative process responsible for the institution of shared cultural norms, as well as innovation of and deviation from the same.[6] Imaginaries are made of shared social symbols, significations, tropes, and themes; this is what makes it possible for people who speak the same language to understand the words that come out of each other's mouths; it further produces a realm in which wordplay, nuance, and creation can occur. The imaginary is therefore the space where the determined world of symbols interacts with the as-yet-undetermined world of human action, emotion, and behavior.

Castoriadis conceives of the social imaginary as an enduring entity that moves through time in symbiotic relationship with those humans whose cultural activities continually consume and work upon it. Humans do more than merely reproduce symbols; they also create and wield them. To understand this requires a return to history. It is the imaginary moment in history that provides the opportunities for reproduction and innovation. As such, we must consider not only the official or common meanings of the symbols, which present themselves to us in imaginary artifacts such as folktales and poetry, but also the history of the imaginary sphere, and the relationship of historical individuals to the same.

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[5] The *imaginaire* of continental thought does not yet accord well with the nuances of the *imaginary* in English. This is, by itself, not a sufficient reason to avoid using the English term. Reviews of the concept of the imaginary as it applies to Buddhist thought can be found in Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 72–89; and Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power: Imagining Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[6] It is not possible in this space to do justice to Castoriadis's thought, and the reader is referred instead to his "Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads," in *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge*, 1997, at http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf [accessed January 2008]; and Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1975).

Particular imaginary creations, such as folktales, take place in relationship to history and institutions, which supply the creations' flavor and force. These histories and institutions are patterned by the instituted social imaginary, but it would be impossible that they would parallel it neatly. Moreover, individuals do not interact with "the imaginary," but with elements that partially compose it. It is important then not only to specify the historical moment of an imaginary performance, which could include the reading of a text, but also to specify the imaginary elements involved and attempt to supply some of the flavor and force of cultural history.

The sites of my analysis of the Khmer imaginary's depictions of hierarchy emerge out of my readings of three stories. Like Chandler in "Songs," I examine two folktales and a historical document—a transcript from my own fieldwork. In each case, the intersection of maternal symbolism, food, and transformative thoughts about death reveals a consistent way of conceiving patronage, dependence, and reflections on how to improve one's lot.

The stories in "Songs" share many elements: in each, the protagonists are forced to leave their former relations—especially their parents—and find new patrons. In each, the shadow of death looms in different ways over the transformation required by their new situation. Finally, each identifies dependency, mostly displayed in symbols of food, as the basis of their relationship to their patrons.

The story of Venerable Sokh tells of a tribal "Pnong" child who rises to become a well-known abbot.[7] He is the sole survivor of the massacre of his extended family by a Pnong chieftain's gang. A Khmer merchant adopts and cares for him, and gives him the equipment necessary to become a civilized person: the Khmer language and Buddhism.[8]

In the *"Kaun Lok"* story, one of the three examined by Chandler in "Songs," a mother busy enjoying sudden unearned prosperity tries to murder her three girls by abandoning them in the forest. Sheltered and fed by a tree spirit, they transform into birds and declare their independence from their mother.

The final story I examine is that of Grandmother Cheata, a Buddhist laywoman whose patrons are indifferent and increasingly impotent. She feels that she herself should be considered the "mother" of the temple at which she resides, but instead her position becomes ever more precarious. She ritually transforms herself in an attempt to salvage her situation.

Every reading is necessarily situated in the history and context of one's own history, including my discussions of these stories. I make no claim that the readings I propose are universally shared or even dominant. My point is rather that the symbols constitute a shared universe that may lead to various, but not infinite, moral judgments depending on the characters with whom one identifies.

Audiences easily and rightly sympathize with children from tragic stories. But these stories all raise more questions than they answer, questions that may be part of the "worklike" aspect of the narratives concerning children discussed in other essays

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[7] Almost certainly, given the location near Kracheh, from the highland ethnic group Mnong Kâ.

[8] See Anne Hansen, "The Image of an Orphan: Cambodian Narrative Sites for Buddhist Ethical Reflection," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62,3 (2003): 811–34, for an examination of this story that explores its attempts at moral edification.

in this volume.[9] The horrible violence beginning each of the two folktales—of the Venerable Sokh and the "*Kaun Lok*"—results in the separation of children from their families and mothers. Yet the resilience of Sokh, who thrives after his entire family is murdered, or the independence of the girls whose mother attempts to murder them, is even more surprising than the violence. Who are these children, violently separated from their families, who thrive on new sources of support?

FAMILIES, HIERARCHIES, AND THE SERVICE OF HOLY MOTHER RICE

Hierarchy is often implicated when states drown their populations in horror.[10] Perhaps for this reason, many students of Cambodia have been interested in traditional Cambodian ways of enacting and representing hierarchy.[11] Cambodians themselves are acutely aware of hierarchy as a problem, though they do not normally frame its opposite in the nationalist vision of some supposed and generalized bourgeois equality. Although I will be primarily concerned with hierarchy *inside* the Khmer imaginary, I have found it important to address one possible origin of those symbols. This entails discussing one of the very bases of Khmer civilization—rice and its cultivation. As far as I am aware, the only word in the Khmer language that refers to rice in every stage of cultivation and consumption, is *Preah Me*—Holy Mother Rice.[12] Indeed, rice gave birth to the Khmer, but she has not always been a kind mother.

Steven Collins has convincingly connected the social and agricultural transformation accompanying the rise of agricultural society to the Buddhist imaginary with which he is concerned.[13] In Cambodia, social complexity and hierarchy were accompanied by the intensification of rice agriculture.[14] We know that Khmer culture, especially during the Angkorean era, has been incredibly complex and that many grades of society were named and social markers assigned.[15]

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[9] This may be part of the "worklike" aspect of these stories mentioned by Hansen in her essay in this volume, quoting Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 30.

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974); and Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007).

[11] See for example John Marston, "Cambodia 1991–94: Hierarchy, Neutrality, and Etiquettes of Discourse" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1997).

[12] All other words for rice and its component pieces refer to specific stages in cultivation, processing, and consumption.

[13] "Violence, exploitation, and inequality entered into the very constitution of the agrarian states in which Buddhist felicities were produced as objects of human aspiration, including the utopian discourse that wished such things away." Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 9.

[14] The adaptive selection of foodgetting methods results in a type of rice production that is distinctive from that of its contemporary neighbors. See for instance Jeff Fox and Judy Ledgerwood, "Dry-Season Flood-Recession Rice in the Mekong Delta: Two Thousand Years of Sustainable Agriculture?," *Asian Perspectives* 38,1 (1999): 37–50; Richard A. O'Connor, "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology," *Journal of Asian Studies* 54,4 (1995): 968–96. Hansen also argues for a regional approach in Hansen, "The Image of an Orphan."

[15] Vickery devotes an entire chapter to untangling some of these issues in the seventh and eighth centuries. Michael Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The*

Yet, aside from some very restricted forms of administrative hierarchies, often appropriated from colonial usages, modern Cambodia lacks depersonalized vocabularies to refer to what academics call patron-client networks. If these networks were absent this would not be a problem. However, patron-client relations are often understood to form the basis of social life in Cambodia.[16] This disconnect is resolved when we understand that most nonfamilial, hierarchical Cambodian relationships are nevertheless framed in familial terms.

Khmer historical experience is one in which parents, and especially mothers, have long been a symbol for patrons on whom one is forced to depend too much. Hierarchical and dependent relations seem necessary in Cambodia to get almost anything accomplished. Social life is largely to be found in the flux and negotiation of status relationships. The closer and more intimate a relationship, such as that of mother and child, the more absolute the relationship of authority. This is true in relationships that are metaphorically represented as involving a "mother and child," as well as with many real mothers and children.

Like a patron, a mother can be authoritarian, unquestionable, and disobeyed only with risk. Like some clients, children are commonly completely dependent on their mothers. Such intense relations of dominance and dependence can be difficult to endure even in normally nurturing Cambodian households. In situations where dependency is unmatched by real intimacy or moral reciprocity, absolute authority or dependency—hierarchy—appears downright dangerous.

A relationship characterized by such unequal relations of authority and dependency strongly resembles relationships between masters and slaves, a relationship that existed in Cambodian society until quite recently. The ethnic Khmer are one group of a family of Mon-Khmer people, the vast majority of whom are highland-dwelling groups engaged in limited forms of agriculture and horticulture. The modern Khmer often refer to all such groups indiscriminately as Pnong, a word some translate simply as "slave."[17]

Unlike these highland cousins, the Khmer became rulers of vast territories and substantial numbers of people, and inheritors of the modern Cambodian nation-state. One way this was accomplished was through slave raids on the highlands. During the waning period of the Angkorean empire, the Chinese emissary noted that highland slaves referred to their masters as "mother" (*me*) and "father."[18] Many of these slaves were put to work in the rice fields. To work in the service of Holy Mother Rice meant to work like Khmer do today: in the fields of lowland Cambodia.

Seventh–Eighth Centuries (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for UNESCO, The Toyo Bunko, 1998).

[16] Judy Ledgerwood and John Vijghen, "Decision-Making in Rural Khmer Villages," in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2002), pp. 109–50; Marston, "Cambodia 1991–94: Hierarchy, Neutrality and Etiquettes of Discourse."

[17] Mathieu Guérin, "Aborigènes, monarchie cambodgienne, et entreprise coloniale française: Pouvoirs et dominations dans le Nord-est cambodgien sous le règne de Norodom 1860–1904" (PhD thesis, University of Paris, 2000), p. 3. See also Eve Zucker, "Memory and (Re)making: Moral Order in the Aftermath of Violence in a Highland Khmer Village in Cambodia" (PhD dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2007).

[18] Zhou Daguan, *The Customs of Cambodia, by Chou Ta-Kuan, Translated into English from the French Version by Paul Pelliot of Chous' Chinese Original*, trans. J. Gilman Paul d'Arcy, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1993), p. 21.

I will now briefly recount the story of the Venerable Sokh, "who rose up to become a teacher."[19] This story is found in the *Kotelok*, a compendium of tales intended for moral edification, written by an intellectual with a long history of monastic ordination, and published during the French Protectorate. He warns readers not to discriminate against minority groups because some of them can possess wisdom equal to Sokh's. The story follows a child from the "savage" world of highlander tribes to the civilized world where he became a learned monk, "content to perform the kind of sacrifice natural to Buddhist lands." This last reference to Buddhist sacrifice appears to be a way of distinguishing between the types of "moral" sacrifice in Buddhism, and the "immoral" sacrifices of animals by highlander groups. Sokh's story is one of a flight to the safety and morality of civilization.

Sokh is introduced as a young "Pnong" child, living "in the upper country, who got his food in the manner of the forest-dwellers."[20] Sokh has been sent to a forest rice field, where the grain is specifically identified as a strain of "wild rice."[21] He is in the forest alone guarding the rice when tragedy strikes. His family is accused of practicing black magic, a crime we are told is punished by Pnong chieftains through the slaughter of seven lines of the criminal's family. The sentence is carried out in the village, after which the gang heads to the forest to find the boy, who is his family's last survivor. He successfully hides in the tangled forest overstory while they search the area, bound in the tree's embrace until the still of the night, when he drops down to depart. Thinking over his situation he flees the garden and runs straight through the forest to the village situated lower on the mountain. He begs to hide in a house owned by some Pnong residing there. These Pnong take pity on him, give him some rice and water to hold him over,[22] and hide him in their house.

He "dropped down to depart," in a phrase that alludes to a common synonym for dying. His first journey leads him to an ethnically similar people who speak his language, but have assimilated Khmer forms of agriculture.[23] Perhaps it is also only coincidental that, just as they are less savage and more involved in Khmer-style riziculture, they are also more generous and more willing to help a strange boy. But the violence of the Pnong reaches down to this lower village, and the villagers warn him, "We won't be able to protect you further, if you stay here ... If you want to save your life, you will have to run down to the lands of the Khmer."[24]

Sokh finally tells his entire story, in the Pnong language, to a traveling Khmer merchant whose moral nature and childlessness lead him to adopt Sokh as his "Dharma Child," so that he protects him and teaches him Khmer. In return, Sokh works hard every day "to serve the merchant so that he would never be irritated."

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[19] This is the title given by its redactor in the *Kotelok*. See Ind Sottântâbreychea, "Reuang phikkho Sukh chea pong kru" (The Story of Bhikkhu Sukh, who Rose up to Become a Teacher), in *Kotelok (Gatiloka)* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1964), pp. 51–57.

[20] Ibid., p. 51.

[21] Ibid., p. 52.

[22] *asray*, a word used in the Chuon Nath dictionary as a synonym for *nissay*, "dependence."

[23] They live "lower," and in the *srok*. This story may cast some light on a point made by Muriel Paskin Carrison, who mentions that the Pnong associated unfamiliar methods of food preservation and production learned from "elsewhere" with black magic. See Muriel Paskin Carrison, *Cambodian Folk Stories from the Gatiloke, from a Translation by the Venerable Kong Chhean* (Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle, 1987), p. 79.

[24] Ind, "The Story of Bhikkhu Sukh," p. 55.

The merchant sends the child to the local Buddhist temple, where he learns to read and write. Eventually Sokh ordains as a full monk, where "he remained in robes, content in the service of Buddhism until the end of his days."[25]

Read from a perspective that assumes civilization—in this case, the Khmer civilization—is superior to "savagery," the story shows savages acting savagely to a person who later lives up to the universal ideal of Buddhist civilization. As important as Sokh's attainment of Buddhist morality is his acquisition of the Khmer language, noted throughout the story. This is a story where a master who "can speak to him or her in his or her own language" saves a savage child.[26] In a society where the learned monk represents the pinnacle of culture, Sokh is the ideal accultural success. He becomes literate in Khmer at the Buddhist temple and takes higher ordination for the rest of his celibate life. Considered in this light, the difference between Sokh's origin and his destination is the difference between the Pnong's savage, undependable strength and wealth, and the civilized, durable, celibate poverty of the Khmer Buddhist monk.

Sokh's problems in the beginning of the story emerge from the ignorance and violence of his own people, the Pnong. For our narrator, the tragedy that ensues is the consequence of the Pnong's *natural* ignorance: violence is natural to the forests, and habitual to those who speak other languages and serve other religions. The story of Sokh classifies the Pnong as the epitome of a violent, immoral people and identifies Khmer Buddhists as those struggling to conquer violence and immorality. The relationship between the two is characterized, in the Khmer view, by pity and charity, and in the best cases, by complete assimilation of the former to the latter.

However, the representation of the Pnong as savages and of the Khmer as admirably civilized grossly distorts the historical relations between lowland Khmer and highlanders, which were based on economic trade and slaving raids. Slaving raids carried out by lowlanders against highland peoples normally involved the massacres of adults, especially males, leaving children and occasionally their mothers to be enslaved.

It seems important that Sokh's birth parents were murdered, and that he was adopted into a Khmer family. His story is one of transformation, involving the transfer of familial dependency. Born a lowly Pnong, someone whose very birth makes him a "natural slave" in Khmer, he rose to be a learned monk. His transformation took place under threat of death and involved being adopted into a new family, eating new foods, and practicing a new religion. This may have been a viable path for some children seized from highlander villages. Most children ripped from their families, however, would not have ended up as respected monastic teachers, though they were frequently given to temples. They would have been much more likely to end up working in the fields, as happened to the children in the next story.

The act of representing hierarchical relationships in familial terms strengthened those relationships characterized in this manner and encouraged Khmer patrons and clients, or, masters and servants, to act in ways intended to reinforce the moral bond connecting them. The mutual need and attraction lay in the fact that

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[25] Ibid., p. 57.

[26] Hansen, "The Image of an Orphan," p. 831.

> The wealth of the rich, and the power of the strong, lay in the dependent man- (and woman-) power they could gather around them. For the poor and the weak, on the other hand, security and opportunity depended upon being bonded to somebody strong enough to look after them.[27]

Few figures are weaker or more vulnerable than an orphan like Sokh; stripped of parents, relatives, and patrons, such persons can become completely dependent on those who feed and clothe them.

MATRONS AND PATRONS

The story of hierarchy in Khmer culture is not exclusively grounded in the complex history of Khmer relationships with their upland cousins. The supposed savagery of the wild was conjured up and woven into the fabric of the Khmer moral universe, inflecting perceptions of the actual slaves brought from the mountains and forests.

Persons who are unhappy within a hierarchical relationship react differently depending on their position. Subordinates might well be dissatisfied in cases where they feel they have performed their "filial" duties and yet the patron continues to press his or her advantage by calling for additional service in terms more intimate than appropriate. The subordinates might then attempt to distance themselves from their patron. If not directly expressed through violence, patron dissatisfaction can be noted when, in the face of reluctance or resistance, patrons invoke even stronger familial terms than usual; they may emphasize the moral obligations they themselves have fulfilled, excellent treatment they have provided, or the special favors previously lavished upon their newly defiant "children." When the relationship is functioning well, a patron may approve of his or her "child's" filiality, or a subordinate appreciate his or her "parent's" reassuring care and concern. In all cases, it is the emotional strength of the evoked familial bond that gives the moral claims their force.

The most intimate and hierarchical human relationship of all appears to be that between mother and child. For a newborn, the mother is the primary source of all sustenance and love, which can be symbolized later in life by food. In return for her love and support, Khmer children are often expected to obey their mother absolutely, help around the house and with the younger children, and care for her when she is old. This is a common and humane solution to the phenomenon of generations. But the hierarchies that animate the Cambodian home relate to hierarchies outside it.

Cambodian literature has a tendency to kill off its mothers; often this is done for reasons that concern food. While real mothers are given a great deal of official and often genuinely pious reverence, relations between mothers and children in stories often contain a great deal of imaginary violence. Penny Edwards's essay[28] in this volume discusses another Cambodian folktale in which a son kills and consumes his own mother, believing mistakenly that she had cheated him of some of his meat,

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[27] Anthony Reid, "Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian history," in *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), p. 188.

[28] Penny Edwards, "Between a Song and a *Prei*: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest," in this volume.

when instead it had simply been reduced in cooking. Like the girls in the next story I will discuss, the murdered mother in that tale turns into a bird. Anne Hansen's essay[29] includes the story of a woman who attempts to kill her son in order to satisfy the different hunger of sexual desire. The similarities in these stories are striking, and can be found in other genres of story as well.

The Buddha's biography includes a dead mother, as does the Cambodian story of *Preah Ko Preah Keov*, in which a pregnant woman dies craving an unripe mango and then splits open to give unnatural birth to a human child and a magical calf. Perhaps we can say that dead mothers are a popular part of the hero genre, in which birth in difficult circumstances is *de rigueur*. When a person overcomes these obstacles to become heroic, his or her greatness is proclaimed. The achievements of a hero who lacks a mother are attributed to him and his own prowess: there is no one "behind" the hero, and no need to look further for the origin of the power he expresses. The dead mother is usually left behind in such stories, as we follow the further exploits of the (often masculine) hero. The hero with a dead mother appears as a fantasy of authentic power, unburdened by dependence or debts, by social dependence and hierarchy, in narratives where the mother figures as the ambiguous ground on which normal people must rely. In this imaginary, the paradigm of success requires finding a way to get rid of one's mother, or patron. A paradigm of revolt, in contrast, might involve the violent murder and consumption of one's mother, as in the folktale discussed by Edwards.

Dangerous and ambivalent mothers populate forests full of spirits as well. Ghosts called "original mothers" reach out from the forests for human babies, seeking to pull them back to the other side of the membrane separating human life from all others.[30] If an original mother wins the child, it dies and turns into a ghost, matching the form of its new mother and patron. In contrast with a situation where patrons choose among a surplus of clients, this image of two mothers fighting to hold onto a single child involves, instead, a surplus of would-be patrons.[31]

In Cambodia, patrons are frequently metonymized as mothers. Titles of mastery, prestige, and relative status in a Cambodian hierarchy are prefixed by the word *me*, "mother."[32] A village chief, though usually male, is nevertheless called a *mephoum*. Over time, the title has expanded in use as an independent prefix, allowing even for the "title" of *mechao*—master thief.

So men, and less often women, are often called "mother" when they are referred to in their authoritative and powerful social aspect, which is precisely the aspect that

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[29] Anne Ruth Hansen, "Gaps in the World: Harm and Violence in Khmer Buddhist Narrative," in this volume.

[30] *mtay daoem*. Ang Choulean, *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmer* (Paris: CEDOREK, 1986), pp. 165–78.

[31] This image is mirrored by stories that involve two living mothers competing for one child, a category of folktale still popular in Cambodia. See Buddhist Institute, "Reuang strei pi neak dântaoem kaun knea (Two Women Fight over one Child)," in *Tossanavddey reuang preng khmaer tmei: Karkatktey* (The Magazine of New Khmer Folktales: Judgment), ed. Sor Sokny, et al. (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2005), pp. 5–6; and Buddhist Institute, "Srey 2 neak dandaoem kaun knea" (Two Women Fight over a Single Child), in *Prochum reuang preng* (Collected Folk Stories) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1921).

[32] The Buddhist Institute Khmer dictionary notes that the primary definition of *me* is: the mother of "wild beings." Chuon Nath Ven, *Vochânanukrâm Khmaer* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1967), s.v. *me*.

defines the patron in a patron-client relationship. Patron-client relationships can be simply instrumental, but they are, in fact, rarely so in Cambodia; most are reinforced by real sentiments of various types. This is what makes the bonds so strong and durable; the casual air with which "professional careerists" switch allegiance and attach themselves to new patrons, or new employers, seems positively mercenary in comparison.

This pattern of assigning authoritative titles based on words for "mother" has been cited in discussions of possible Cambodian matrilineality, matriarchy, and matrifocality.[33] My discussion focuses on historical bases that may clarify the significance of the image of the mother in the contemporary Khmer imaginary, though links between the rise of social symbols and the perpetuation of social practices may be found. Given the linguistic overlap between terms referring to powerful individuals and ordinary mothers, perhaps the symbolic overlap is inevitable. But the forced assimilation of highlanders may also have been described and thereby shaped through a maternal idiom; for example, the leader of a work gang or village may have been identified as a "mother."

Like many Cambodian patrons, real mothers can exercise a seemingly limitless moral authority over their children, just as they ideally nourish, provide, and care for them within the bounds of their ability. And just as patrons are symbolized as mothers, so clients become children. In this way, standard prayers to all manner of supernatural beings include the identification of the supplicant as *kaun-chav*, child or grandchild.

Michael Vickery has remarked on the linguistic relationship between motherhood and patronage. Additionally, he derives the word *khnhom* (*kñum*), a modern, all-purpose ego-identifier, from a word meaning "'child,' or 'junior,' within the family or lineage ... "[34] Over time, this term had come to encompass not only real children, but also junior partners in social or economic enterprise, or a client of a patron. Vickery agrees with Michael Augé that a system of address of this sort "may have ... corresponded to the relations between slaves and their owners."

Mothers and patrons seem to mirror each other in the Cambodian social imaginary, when both are capable either of properly supporting those who serve them—their "children"—or of behaving cruelly and thoughtlessly toward them in ways that break all bounds of human morality When a vicious mother dies in folktales, it may be a tragedy, or it may constitute a proper punishment for her failure to take care of her dependents: those who truly provide the ground for the patron's wealth. When a revered hero's mother dies, as in the case of the Buddha, or as happened in *Preah Ko Preah Keov*, this event may be read as a claim for the supreme excellence of the hero.[35] As noted above, in such cases, no patron helped the hero attain his victories, and no greater power looms behind the hero as he advances.

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[33] Judy Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship: The Matriliny/Matriachy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51 (1995): 147–259; F. Martini, "Notes d'étymologie khmère," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoise* 2 (1951): 219–23; Jacques Népote, *Parenté et organisation sociale dans le Cambodge moderne et contemporain: Quelques aspects et quelques applications du modèle les régissant* (Geneva: Olizane/Etudes Orientales & CEDORECK/Bibliothèque Khmère 1992); Robert Parkin, "Descent in Old Cambodia: Deconstructing a Matrilineal Hypothesis," *Zeutschrift für Ethnologie* 115 (1990): 209–27.

[34] Vickery, *Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia*, p. 273.

[35] The death of the mother in such stories also reinforces a gendering of the social *imaginaire*, which relegates heroism to men and attempts to limit women to the functions of reproduction.

Conversely, when children die, the reader's attention shifts to the mother—why was she unable or unwilling to prevent their unjust and untimely death? When children run away, we are led to wonder what happened at home.[36] The story of the origins of the *Kaun Lok* bird, whose name means "child of the world," tells of three girls who flee their cruel mother and undergo a radical transformation.

RUN AWAY TO THE FOREST, TURN INTO A BIRD

In this story, a widow abandons her three daughters after she has taken a local bandit as her new husband.[37] Early in this new marriage, when the girls are still living at home, the bandit husband showers his wife with stolen goods, and there is food in the house again after a long period of privation. But none of this largesse trickles down to the widow's daughters. Instead, we are told that the mother would cook only for herself and her husband, leaving the children to claw out whatever rice might be left in the pot. Similarly, no decent place was provided for the girls to sleep, and so they would sleep next to the stove or under the house, so that their bodies came to be covered with mosquito bites. Every morning the two adults would run off to drink in the market as soon as they had woken up, leaving the children to fend for themselves.

But the mother, too, is eventually forced into a corner; although she's been enjoying her new lifestyle, her husband suddenly commands her to stop following him around and stay at home, caring for the girls. His buddies are ridiculing him for always being with his wife, and he is embarrassed. Worried that one of the "whores at the market" will steal her new husband in her absence, the mother hatches a plan: if her children are dead, her husband will have no reason to command her to stay home.

She tells her three girls that they should go to the forest, to a place where their family has traditionally grown rice, near a man-made pond. Their job is to keep the birds away from the vulnerable new rice during this dry season. (We recall that Sokh was also, at the age of "around ten or eleven," sent to live alone in the forest to guard the rice.) The widow leaves them by the pond with a small amount of civilized food and some fire. After the mother threatens to beat the girls to death if they try to return home from the forest, the narrator lists all the food supplies she leaves for them in detail: "just enough cooked rice for one meal each, three tins of uncooked rice, several corn seeds, a small clay pot, and just a tiny bit of salty *prâhok*."[38]

A local tree spirit takes pity on the girls and protects them from the local wild animals. The next morning, the spirit goes to request help from his own patron, Varuna, the god of the northeastern direction, in hope that Varuna will ask Indra, king of the gods, to intervene. But Varuna doesn't want to bother his own superior with the tree spirit's minor local affair. In a passage ruefully familiar to those with

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[36] In these Cambodian folktales, children are separated from their mothers for an enormous number of reasons, most of which boil down to hunger of various forms. Most such separations are not entirely the fault of real mothers, and my discussion here should be taken to refer solely to the symbolic reading of mothers and children that understands them as metonyms of patrons and their dependents.

[37] Buddhist Institute, "Daerm kâmnaoert sâtv kaun lok" (The Origins of the *Kaun Lok* Bird), in *Prochum reuang preng* (Collected Folk Stories) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1966), pp. 1–6.

[38] *Prâhok* comprises a significant proportion of the daily protein intake of many Cambodians. It thus represents one of the staples of civilized Khmer food.

experience of a patronage network, Varuna immediately squashes the tree spirit's hope that he, Varuna, will agree to spend his own social capital to resolve this dilemma for his subordinate. Varuna determines that this affair "need not concern Indra, king of the gods, since these girls are going to transform into birds." He charges the tree spirit with protecting these girls from vicious animals and hunger. To provide the girls with food, Varuna suggests the tree spirit conjure up some *kreum* fish, rabbits, and snails, to be placed in the pond for the girls to catch.[39]

Before they transform into birds, the three daughters return to their mother's home one time to beg for a little rice. Instead their mother beats them unconscious. As Chandler noted in his essay, the beating is the result of a mix-up with words—the youngest speaks clumsily, and her mother mishears her. The confusion concerns a pathetic meal of rabbit eaten raw by the girls. The mother misunderstands and becomes furious at the thought that the girls were feasting in the forest and not sharing the food with her. She beats and clubs her daughters until they are broken and bleeding. They barely make it back to their forest hut before passing out. Their new protector, the tree spirit, sprinkles water on them until they regain consciousness. The reader now knows with certainty that there has been no confusion, and that these children will never be able to rely on their mother again. Thankfully, the tree spirit has been conjuring up live fingerling fish and snails for the girls to eat in and around the forest pond.

The tree spirit's foods are as wild as the forest itself. They are not precisely unpleasant, but neither are they civilized. The methods for securing these meals involve fishing and hunting, both of which are deemed morally questionable from a Buddhist point of view. By this time the girls' fire has been extinguished, so they are forced to eat their food raw.

In addition to dining on the animal foods provided by the tree spirit, the girls also forage and grow some of their own food, including morning glory, watercress, corn and rice from their mother's seeds, and fresh sugarcane. They become quite independent and appear better nourished than they were at their mother's home. However, since they have no needles nor looms, their clothes disintegrate, and they are obliged to go about naked. At this point, their physical transformation into wild animals begins.[40]

In the story, the transformation happens gradually, over a period of time, during which they gradually learn to adjust to their new limitations and possibilities—such as flying, a capability that enables them to reach fruit in the trees much more easily. The loss of human language results from physical, rather than mental, changes; they still understand and try to speak Khmer, but the beaks they wear on their faces like masks distort the sounds.[41]

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[39] *Kreum* fish are a small fingerling fish emblematic of poor people's food.

[40] They are referred to, and refer to themselves, as *tirochchhan* animals, which I simply translate here as "wild." In Pali, a *tiracchāna* animal is one that moves on four legs, clearly not a usage intended in this story. In 1927, a Cambodian village was officially renamed Phoum Tirochchhan in response to the murder by those villagers of a French *resident* who had come there to collect unpaid taxes. Perhaps not coincidentally, the village abbot had told the villagers immediately before the murder that they should pay the demanded taxes because *the French were their new parents*. See David P. Chandler, "The Assassination of Résident Bardez (1925): A Premonition of Revolt in Colonial Cambodia," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays, 1971–1994* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 149.

[41] This loss is the only one that is not remedied by a wild substitute, in what the Khmer call the "meat of the story"(*sach reuang*)—the plot, or meaning.

At the end of the story, the mother's new husband has been arrested by local officials and put away in prison for life. Suddenly bereft of her position as the wife of a wealthy man, the mother remembers her girls and rushes to "take them back." She recognizes her daughters in spite of their transformation because they have not yet lost their roughly human shapes. She calls them to her, promising to take them home, but they fly away from her, thinking she has come to finish them off. The narratives describes their reactions:

> "Our mommy has come again to try to murder us. We shouldn't trust her. Now we can fly and that's better." Thinking this way, they flew straight to the top of a tall tree and shouted back to their mother, "We are no longer dependent, like children of the world, and we are far more beautiful. Don't come near us!"

The word the children use at the beginning of the passage is *me*, or "mommy." The word they use to refer to their mother later in this address to her is *neak*, nearly the most general term of address possible implying no ongoing relationship between the speaker and the listener. The children dissolve the mother-child relationship at this moment. The relationship of dependence the children shared with their mother was erased by her long before.

In the *"Kaun Lok"* story, the mother doesn't understand the bird-girls' replies, and she chases after them as they flit effortlessly from tree to tree, always staying just beyond her grasp. Eventually she dies of exhaustion, which is where the story ends.

> The mother kept running and running after them and calling out for them as they fled her, until her body was completely exhausted and she could no longer walk. Anything that runs out of food to consume will inevitably fall and die.

This story is not *only* a fable of abused children who magically transform into birds; it also illustrates that dependency is neither permanent nor immutable. Despite the difficulties, the little girls who have been transformed explicitly prefer their new situation and, as birds, have plenty to eat, while their former mother starves to death alone, with neither support nor dependents. Sokh's flight to the civilized life of the monastery in the earlier story makes sense in light of the violence from which he escapes. Similarly, the three girls in this story flee from civilization to the forest, an unsurprising action given the violence of their mother.

DEPENDENCY 1. *NISSAY* AND BEING

The word I have translated as "dependent" in the final speech of the girls to their mother, above, is *nissay*, a Khmer word that has often posed problems for students of Cambodian culture. *Nissay* appears to refer to something with the capacity to influence our future action or being, and is therefore usually, and often appropriately, translated as "fate" or "destiny."

Nissay derives from the Pali word *nissaya*, meaning "that on which anything depends, support, foundation, reliance on." The verb also carries the warmer tones of "to lean on, ... rely on, trust, pursue" when it is conjugated actively. Robert Headley's dictionary defines *nissay* as "support, aid, assistance; gift, talent, resource, determination," and supplies the sub-meanings of "to have" and "to request" *nissay*.

"To have *nissay*," according to Headley, corresponds with the common, semi-aleatory nuance of "fate," or "destiny," as in, "we have a common destiny." "To request *nissay*," in Headley's definition, is "to ask for support."[42]

In Chuon Nath's Khmer dictionary, *nissay* is defined more precisely than in the sources mentioned above. This dictionary clearly defines *nissay* as "an unquestioning dependence and obedience to another." His first example states that "to request *nissay* is to ask to remain under another's advice, support, and protection, by not acting according to one's own wishes, and concerning oneself with those of the other."[43]

A paradigmatic act of asking for *nissay* is when a Buddhist novice asks for ordination at a specific temple: he asks for dependency from the temple's abbot, and promises obedience and loyalty in return. Disciple relationships of this sort quickly take on the linguistic tendencies found outside of clerical relations, so that the abbot will often be referred to in familial terms identifying him as a member of an elder generation. The abbot is also specifically the *mewatt*, or Mother of the Temple.

These two meanings of a single word, in which *nissay* means both fate and dependency, seem quite distant from each other. What links them is a shared concern with a particularly Khmer image of hierarchy's flipside: Stripped of their mother, the girls sing of freedom from their former dependency with their new beaks. Why should relationships such as those indicated by *nissay* determine one's future, to the extent that they can change the very physical forms of a person's being, as they do in the "*Kaun Lok*" story?

One is born of one's mother, and takes her physical form: human mothers rarely give birth to bird children. Children, especially human children, must depend wholly on their mothers in their early lives. To escape from the dependency and hierarchy of a maternal relationship necessitates a change in one's ontology, which can be most easily affected in this imaginary through the process of death.

Buddhist thought also links dependency and being. *Nissay* is closely linked with the concept of karma and its results, which are called "fruits." The metaphor is an agricultural one: our actions plant seeds. After an interval, these seeds have grown into trees, and bear fruit, which we eat. Immoral actions lead to bitter fruit.

Nissay is intimately related to this karmic cycle, but different from it. Like karma, *nissay* influences, but does not wholly determine, the opportunities open to us in our current life. However, *nissay* is not necessarily identical to *samkhara*, the "habitual formations" of karmic results that Buddhists believe help to compose our lives, though it certainly shares many of its features.[44] In human relations, as the translation I've proposed above indicates, *nissay* refers to the grounds on which a person's life is based, which are constituted, in part, from that person's karma. *Nissay* evokes the guidance, educative advice, and authority of an ideal patron: nourishing

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[42] Robert K. Headley, Jr. *Cambodian-English Dictionary, Volumes I and II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), s.v. *nissay*.

[43] Chuon Nath Ven, *Vochânanukrâm Khmaer*.

[44] A monk in Kompong Cham province described the difference between the two by explaining that the components and workings of *samkhara* are observable and can be investigated, while those of *nissay* are mysterious. An urban monk in Phnom Penh suggested a different division: while *samkhara* is the basis for the negative characteristics of existence, such as old age, sickness, and death, *nissay* is a decoration (*kartaktaeng*) that provides good things. Fieldnotes, 2006.

and sustaining, stern but not cruel. It invokes the model of a guru-teacher.[45] One lives with one's guru, and one receives both physical and spiritual nourishment from the guru who has offered *nissay* to a disciple.[46]

Insofar as a person has a *nissay*, this implies a relationship at least partly formed by unknowable causes, in which one party is dependent on and loyal to another. The dependent partner is rooted in this relationship in ways that he or she may not fully understand. When children are named by their mothers, or when monks are given monastic names at ordination, they enter into a *nissay* relationship, which sustains and identifies them. When the relationship is with another person—fallible, knowable, and sometimes cruel—a *nissay* may help fulfill needs, but it does not necessarily provide a "safe" situation.

If we were to judge which of the characters' basic needs were most significant and pressing in the *"Kaun Lok"* story, the need for food would probably be ranked at the top based on its frequent mention and its importance to the plot. Most people in the world are concerned primarily with acquiring a regular supply of sufficient, nutritious, and delicious food. In Cambodia, it must be served with rice.

If the real or metaphorical mother in a relationship does her job well, she will supply her children with rice, or at least arrange for conditions in which it is not terribly onerous for them to obtain it on their own. "Children" must be "fed," even when they are fully grown men wearing uniforms and three-piece suits.

In turn, the children will obey and not run away from home. This is not an economic relationship; it is a personal relationship that mimics the mother-child relationship and inscribes itself into social interactions. The mother-child relationship is supposed to be one in which gifts are given without consideration of cost. But, as in real families, human societies frequently fall short of such ideals. Like all people, Khmer consider the consequences of moral failures, and their options following such failures. If conditions become too onerous, and a mother or patron no longer meets the needs of her children, their original mother—the forest—might reclaim them. They might die, or they might transform into something far more beautiful.

Abdication and disappearance have never, however, represented the only options of desperate, dominated peoples, and patrons can find themselves suddenly confronted with angry, uncomprehending children they had previously thought docile.

I have argued that, in Cambodia, hierarchies are often represented in maternal dress, and that the junior's dependency on the senior is represented by the need for and exchanges of food. Finally, I propose that attempts to survive, or fantasies of escape, often involve symbols of death. In these stories, dependency and dominance are joined in a pulsating tension. Chandler noted that hierarchical arrangements operate ideally "in the common good." These stories indicate something about the possible consequences that may result if the common good is neglected.

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[45] In fact, the Buddhist ordination ceremony for monks involves precisely a request for *nissay* from one's *Upachchheay*, or ordaining master. This is the process that establishes and perpetuates lineages within the monastic order. See Sou Ketya, Hean Sokhom, and Hun Thirith, *The Ordination Ceremony of Buddhist Monks in Cambodia: Past and Present* (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study, 2005), p. 60.

[46] Trent Walker (personal communication) suggests the elegant "karmic affinity."

DEPENDENCY 2. TRANSFORMATION AND DEATH

In the tale of the "*Kaun Lok*" bird, the girls' transformation is perhaps the most confusing thing about the story. We all understand that the girls do, in fact, turn into birds. But the *why* is never explained. This is perhaps a habit of folklore, insofar as such a narrative embodies any sort of social thought. As with dreams, things in folktales are always more than they seem.

The idea that *nissay*—one's dependence on another—is the basis of the story's ontology helps to explain the transformation of the three daughters. At the beginning of the story, they were dependent little girls, barely surviving since the food and love that their mother should have provided was clearly in short supply. The obsession with food that pervades this story demonstrates a connection between the foods supplied to the little girls and the magical transformation of the girls' bodies. The food received from their mother was civilized food given directly to them, and was received in the context of a deeply hierarchical and, in this case, abusive relationship. The figure of mother appears as a powerful symbol of dependency; mother is where you go when the rest of the world refuses your entreaties for help and sustenance. The imaginary figure of this particular mother is a pungently failed example of decent relations.

The tree spirit, on the other hand, conjures up wild animal foods, but otherwise leaves the girls to their own devices. The girls rapidly become more self-sufficient and independent in this situation, obtaining and eating their own foods, despite the "uncivilized" nature of their existence. The girls never seem aware of the tree spirit. To them, the pond's abundance appears as simple natural abundance, rather than as the gifts of their invisible new patron.

Nevertheless, to change patrons and eat new foods has consequences. The girls still think of themselves as human, but their bodies change into those of "wild beings." Their very physical being has been altered, and a logical explanation is that, since they have ended their relationship of dependency with their human mother and obtained a new one with the tree spirit in the forest, their bodies have changed to suit the nature of their dependency. Little by little, they are stripped of the marks of their humanity—their mother, civilized food, clothing, and language. When their clothes—the last marks of their civilized life—disappear, they begin to change.

It is not surprising in the Cambodian social imaginary that little girls should turn into birds. Individual skeptics might express doubt that we can prove or know such things for certain, but I have met very few Khmer who would argue with the idea that creatures regularly undergo such metamorphoses. The difficulty is that all these "normal" transformations are triggered by the experience of death, which has rather disastrous consequences for the individual involved. What appears to be unusual in this story, therefore, is that the transformation happens within a single lifetime unmarked by death.

Most Cambodians display a sensible humility discussing whether rebirth is real. It nevertheless remains the dominant metaphor for being and becoming in the world they inhabit; the concept of rebirth should never be taken lightly when approaching Khmer stories, even those not considered truly "Buddhist." *Samsara*, the wheel of rebirth in which all beings apart from Buddhas are trapped, generates a world in which any death leads immediately to new birth. While in human form, we are fairly limited in type: rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. The world of animals offers a greater and more pliable world of possibilities, in addition to endowing metaphors with natural authority. So a human becomes an ant or a snake a cat. Through all

these lives, we do things that result in consequences we will experience later. But the knot of karma is notoriously tangled, and most say that only a buddha may know someone's karmic history.

In such a world, the apparently sharp division between death and life is really a division between different types of life, which are always the result of death. In the *"Kaun Lok"* story, the different types of life discussed are, firstly, dependency on the world of human beings and the mothers who symbolize them, and, secondly, dependency on the invisible bounty of the wild, uncivilized world. This uncivilized world is assimilated to death—the pond in the forest is said to be near a forest cemetery, and the girls' cries disturb the spirits of those resting there.

In the Buddhist imaginary, death is a *rite de passage*, a transformation of being rather than an end to it. It is the necessary result of birth, and the moment when everything we are changes, including the food we eat, the places we live, and the people we depend on.[47]

The world of Khmer folktales can seem uncannily like the world inhabited by many modern Khmer people; many of the details, situations, and concerns in those narratives remain extremely relevant.[48] Most stories focus on the problems of individuals caught in largely static and idealized conditions. This allows for both the agency of the individual characters to be expressed, and for the solutions to their problems, if any exist, to be seen as both particular and paradigmatic at the same time. It does this, however, by accepting the social imaginary as given and avoiding any disruption of the hierarchy. A rejection of a particular hierarchical relationship may therefore be represented in the imaginary in seemingly strange ways, including through tragic deaths that result in better lives.

The world in the Khmer Buddhist imaginary is a complex web of relationships among different people and creatures, constantly cycling back and forth between the occasional human birth and the myriad of other forms that life can take. From a human perspective, the gulf between the two categories, human and wild, is defined by two things: language and food. Humans possess language. In the story of Sokh, the acquisition of the Khmer language is the specific accomplishment separating the civilized from savages. And proper humans eat human food, while proper animals eat animal food. Our classification of species is often directed by this principle, such that "pest" species are precisely those species that want to eat food humans have designated for themselves alone. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the girls were nominally brought to the wilderness by their mother to guard against pest animals coming to eat their rice.

But where the girls in this tale found a new and better life as beautiful birds in the forest, this "flight and escape" response to hierarchy is no longer effective in today's Cambodia, even for those with the means to attempt it. Traditionally, Cambodia's rulers have had a much larger problem controlling human labor than land. Now there are thirteen million Cambodians, and increasingly they possess no land of their own. The forests, which formerly promised new frontiers for settlers who aspired to expand Khmer lands, are disappearing, and farmers are being

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[47] A sign at a recent funeral I attended announced: "We've come from somewhere—and we're going back!" (*Yoeng mok pi ti na yoeng tov nauh vinh.*)

[48] This effect was consciously induced in Rithy Panh's film *Les gens de la rizieres*, which the director describes partly as an attempt to understand "why the people from the countryside were so angry."

pushed from their lands to make way for more profitable plantations owned by wealthy landlords.

Today, the neo-liberal transformation of Cambodia has resulted in a cruel joke: the mobility that once offered hopes of increased autonomy is now mandatory, but autonomy itself is increasingly scarce. Under the new regimes dominated by capital and development, mobility most commonly means little more than stumbling forward to find a different master.

CHEATA, WHO WAS HERE BEFORE ANYONE ELSE

The final story I will discuss tells of a woman who worked on a single, prestigious plot of land for twenty-six years before being evicted by the newly powerful patrons of others. Grandmother Cheata was, until recently, a *daunchi*, an ascetic laywoman, at a well-known urban temple, Wat Koh Yeak.[49] In fact, she was a member of the very first group of people to arrive at Wat Koh Yeak after the Vietnamese army invaded in 1979 and one army of communists sent the other fleeing to the border, to be rearmed by a strange alliance of Vietnam's geopolitical enemies.

Grandmother Cheata and her husband, along with one other elderly couple and two additional old men, were traveling together and spent their first night in Phnom Penh huddled in the shadow of Wat Phnom. Many other travelers had the same idea. But in spite of their numbers, they were afraid to light fires for fear of attracting unwanted attention. If they were lucky, they ate raw food. But this sacrifice to discretion was useless; they were seen by the "Vietnamese faction" of the invading armies, who split them up and ordered them to disperse back to their home villages.

In Cheata's narrative, the "Vietnamese faction" is placed in opposition to the "Renakse" faction, and especially to Heng Samrin, whom she calls her "uncle."[50] Chea Sim became her "grandfather." These two men, along with current Prime Minister Hun Sen, were the three leaders of the then-nascent Khmer PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea) government.

While Grandmother Cheata's group was leaving the grounds of Wat Phnom to begin the long march back to her homeland with neither food nor clean water, Heng Samrin recognized her, since they came from the same place. Before 1975, in fact, she had been called to help grieve for the death of one of Heng Samrin's family members in his home. According to Cheata's account, Heng Samrin felt the stirrings of paternal obligation when he encountered her near Wat Phnom. He exempted her and her group from continuing their march toward uncertain receptions in their former homes. Instead, he assigned these six elderly survivors to contribute to the new regime in the city.

They were told to stay at the ruins of Wat Koh Yeak in the city and to clear out the mess they would find there. In return, "Renakse," meaning someone in the patronage network of the Renakse, would "help them a bit" by supplying some food and a few necessities. Cheata's new patron promised her a relationship of dependency, but it was not one she had requested, and it offered patronage of a rather indifferent sort.

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[49] Both Cheata and Wat Koh Yeak's names have been changed. All quotes are my translations of recorded interviews made with Cheata and others during 2004 and 2005.

[50] She uses a Vietnamese word, spelled in Khmer as *ung leuang*, which she says means *um* in Vietnamese.

I met Cheata at Wat Koh Yeak early in my fieldwork. Expressive and angry, her tendency to repeat the same sentences over and over in mantra-like fashion was a boon to me, with my still strained language skills. She was small, with a stooped head shaved to the pate. She had three betel-stained teeth left in her mouth, and a habit of talking loudly with her hands. The first words she spoke to me were: "I was here before anyone else!" She felt that ought to serve as her introduction, and I later found out why.

Desperately poor, she had lived at Wat Koh Yeak since 1979, but had only ordained as a lay nun some three to four years previously, as a result of a change in her own patrons' power. Her dependency on her patron had waned as his authority became undependable. Not long after people heard I had been talking to her, several monks were sent to tell me not to pay any attention to her, as she was just a troublemaker. In fact, trouble seemed to follow her everywhere.

When Cheata and her five elderly companions arrived at Wat Koh Yeak, the temple was "completely wild" (*sotthtae prei*). All the funerary monuments[51] had been smashed, and the sanctuary had been converted to accommodate industrial production and warehouse functions. Either naturally or by design, wild trees had begun to conquer the grounds. Worst of all, the temple grounds were littered with corpses.

"All you could see were bones," she said. The freshest were those left behind after the fighting between the invading armies and the Khmer Rouge. Through the efforts of Cheata and her companions, the temple was reclaimed from the wild state into which it had sunk. They cut trees, collected bones and bodies, and removed rubble from the grounds. At first, they slept on the ground, surrounded by the corpses. Only gradually did they reclaim the land from the fecund powers of death inhabiting the temple.

Like the girls in the *"Kaun Lok"* story, Cheata and her companions had experienced a change in their patronage situation, followed immediately by exile and abandonment when they were forced to labor in a wilderness. The girls' mother abandons her daughters near a forest cemetery. Cheata's "uncle" and "grandfather" sent her to clean up the charnel grounds of Wat Koh Yeak. In both cases, far too little food was given to those assigned to work. Cheata continued to subsist on what amounted to the stereotypical Khmer Rouge diet, eating nothing but rice porridge mixed with foraged morning glory or water lily until the end of 1981. At that point, they received what they considered to be an enormous bounty of uncooked rice—three kilograms. They still didn't dare simply to cook it, but continued eating it as rice porridge. "That made it easier for them to keep giving more. We never had pork, we didn't even have fish, until nowadays. How can we live if we can't eat?" Cheata compared this period with the years she lived under the Democratic Kampuchea regime: through both periods, there was little food, hard work, "no rest when the sun was in the sky," and the dead were always near.

Still, for her, those memories are happier than her situation today. The story of Sokh was of flight to civilization from the forest, and the *"Kaun Lok"* story tells of flights from civilization to the forest. In both cases, they were fleeing violence, hoping to find its absence in the civilizational other. Cheata's story, by contrast, is one of emergence from the wilderness in a time of shrinking options. This is what

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[51] *chetey*, Pali: *cetiya*

happens when one is ejected from the social world of hierarchies, and the forests no longer offer shelter.

And yet, at some level, even these hardships resulted from a moral choice Cheata had made. Immediately after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea, people began to claim and live in houses left empty after the evacuation of 1975. Many of the squatters in those early years maintained their hold on what became enormously valuable real estate. Early in Cheata's tenure at the temple, soldiers had encouraged her to take one of the nearby abandoned houses for her own, but she had refused, feeling that to do so would be to steal something that hadn't been given to her. Moreover, she had been promised a stable dependency, a *nissay*, at the temple, difficult as that life was. Abandoning that stable dependency for the unstable life that could be acquired through "taking other people's homes" made her uncomfortable, both morally and practically.

No one in the temple, not even those who identify her as a no-good troublemaker, disputes Cheata's history as it is outlined here. Instead, the hostility against her is the result of a shift at a higher level in the patronage networks in which she is caught. The old abbot she had served passed away a few years ago, and the new abbot has vigorously pursued patronage directly from elite officials in the country's political structure, including the prime minister.

Up until the new abbot arrived, Cheata had lived at the temple merely as a pious, ordinary laywoman, but had never shaved her head, nor worn the outfit of a *daunchi*, or lay nun. As a result, she was the "child" of no authority within the temple. This seemed justification enough to try and expel her from the temple. Her patron was able to prevent her expulsion, but she was forced to ordain as a lay nun and to submit herself to the authority of the temple. As her own patrons in the original Renakse group became increasingly marginalized and powerless, they became less willing to intervene on her behalf.

Cheata felt the injustice of her situation keenly. She constantly reminded me that she was "the first one to come here," and recalled all the trials and hardships she had endured. As a normal laywoman living at the temple, she had a home: it was an unusual one, but her home was at the temple. This home was given to her, and defended, by her patrons, whose power is now so diminished that they have withdrawn their direct patronage of her.

To remain at her adopted home of Wat Koh Yeak, she would have to formally abandon her old patrons and protections and subordinate herself to the temple hierarchy, living a formally homeless life as a female lay ascetic, a *daunchi*. Dressed now in the white shirt and shiny black pants of the lay ascetics, she has acquired the same status as other *daunchi*, and is as subordinate and dependent as they. She had formally requested, and received, the *nissay* of the temple hierarchy, and was now subject to their full authority.

The administrative and tutorial head of the lay nuns is referred to as *me daunchi*, or the female lay nuns' "mother." The *me daunchi* at the temple was replaced when the new abbot arrived, and the new *me daunchi* makes it clear that her absolute loyalty is to the abbot. It is the *me daunchi* who controls much of what makes a lay nun's life at the temple relatively easy or completely untenable. She chooses which nuns can attend rituals outside the temple, where they typically receive gifts of money, food, and clothing. The nuns give a small amount of the financial gifts they receive to the head nun for the kitchen fund, to buy food other than the rice supplied by the temple.

It is with the control over the rice, and food more generally, that the head nun exercises her authority most effectively, for she also controls which nuns are allowed to eat the food she has purchased with the funds deducted from these gifts. Not all are invited to partake. Those who find themselves outside her good graces must seek other sites of dependence. Prior to her ordination, Grandmother Cheata was among those forbidden from eating the nuns' food, which forced her to concentrate on making money by fashioning and selling ritual objects called *baysei,* which are made out of banana tree materials. This gave her a pittance with which to buy her own food and medicine, and to make merit by donating to the temple. A stroke meant she could no longer do this work, so her daughter began to come to the temple to do the work for her.[52]

Now that she had been ordained, new accusations arose claiming that her business of making *baysei* was unacceptable work for a lay nun. When her daughter came to do the work after Cheata had a stroke, Cheata was accused of allowing her daughter to live at the temple. Eventually she was prevented from making the money she relied on to buy food. The behavior and speech of the head lay nun and the abbot became increasingly intimidating. She even began to fear for her life, believing that others were plotting against her. In this condition, unwelcome, without food to eat and in fear of her safety, promises from her distant patron meant little.

In this context, her ordination, which she says happened because she got so angry that she became ill, can be seen as an attempt to change the dependence of her situation by manipulating the symbolism of celibacy and death, which are ascetic symbols of morality.[53] But unlike the metamorphoses of Sokh and the *"Kaun Lok"* girls, Cheata's transformation did not solve her problems. She herself insisted that she wanted nothing more than what she deserved. She expressed this in words that connected her need for food to the possible resurgence of horror politics. Until recently, she said, food was easier to get than it had been during the "Pol Pot times":

> If it's not like that, we'll be patient, gather merit, and not let Pol Pot come again. So, today I don't want anything except for my health, which I have, and enough money and coin to make some merit. I cleaned this place! I am completely fed up with this entire temple. They should call me the "Mother of the temple" [*me vatt*], or even "Master of the temple" [*mjas vatt*]. If they saw me like that, at least I'd get some new clothes!

Even as a lay ascetic, Cheata was an uncomfortable reminder of a different way of running local affairs, and irritatingly uncooperative in her interactions with her superiors. The *me daunchi* had stripped her of her dependence on the temple, though her hunger continued unabated. Her acquiescence to the demands of conformity, her ordination, only delayed her expulsion and her need to search for new means of

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[52] Another lay nun who was similarly prohibited from the kitchen found herself with no one at all to rely on. I would frequently find her with a bowl of rice begging for scraps from the discarded bowls of other nuns to mix with her white grains of temple rice. She was frail to begin with, and in a single year her health declined so rapidly that her most serious problem was finding the money to pay for medications she hoped had been appropriately prescribed. They often were not.

[53] Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities,* pp. 32–40.

support. She would disappear like the girls in the fable, though her disappearance, in this case, had no effect on her patron.

Cheata had switched her dependency to a new and disapproving patron, and had formally sought *nissay* with the abbot, who assigned his authority over her to the head nun. In such a hopeless situation, Cheata told me that she felt her final hope was to make enough merit as a lay nun that she would improve her next life.[54] Making merit is the most powerful means to insure a comfortable future life, but it requires access, especially, to money that can be donated to the temple. According to her own metaphor, merit is something she "buries in a grave" and puts away for her next life. Without it, her next life will be as miserable as this one.

This image of the grave as a site of future birth, where individuals can save up merit in advance as a kind of investment, is revealing. While the transformation she attempted in order to change her status during this life—the shift from laywoman to lay nun—was insufficient to resolve her crisis, the transformative power of death still beckoned with hints of a better life. Perhaps in her next life she might acquire a more dependable patron, or become more cunning in her dealings with the world.

When I spoke with her, she regretted having failed to heed the advice she received in the early days: to appropriate a nearby villa and make it her own. Had she done so, she and her children would almost certainly have lived very different, more comfortable, lives. But her earlier moral decisions, coupled with a traditional pragmatism favoring a seemingly stable dependency on a patron over an unstable act of piracy, backfired in Cambodia's new climate.

Greed and cunning seemed to her to have become the requisites for a decent life, an apt description of Cambodia's free-market transformation. She didn't possess the foresight to understand how her refusal to take over an abandoned property was a bad economic move that would have consequences more than a decade later. She was similarly unable to foresee the future impotence of her patrons, the Renakse, and the elevation of their former comrades, who would eventually monopolize political power in Cambodia. When her patron lost his power, her own relationship of dependency with him lost its basis, and she was forced back onto other resources.

She attributed her lack of economic cunning to a lack of merit in past lives. She "didn't bury anything and put it away for my next life" in her last existence, she said, and hence she was born without greed or cunning, and without the good things those would have brought her. This deduction of hers contained a moral response to the present: she had concluded that she lacked the opportunistic attitude necessary to support herself decently in modern Cambodia. The skills she imagined would have served her well in an impossibly decent world are the humble ones involved in raising children, making *baysei*, and devoting herself to the service of Buddhism. Though service to Buddha had sustained Sokh in the folktale, Cheata's devotion had not saved her.

One day, after telling me that she wouldn't be around for much longer, she was gone. She had managed to convince her son in the countryside to let her live with him. This prospect worried her because her son was already poor and had too many children. How could he manage with another mouth to feed? But she couldn't stay at the temple any longer.

Now that she had entered a situation where she would be unable to make even a small amount of merit, even the promise of potential transformation through rebirth

[54] I am using "merit" to translate *bon*, Pali: *puñña*

began to smack of failure, since it appeared that she would enter into yet another painful life. We can make merit and attempt to influence it for the better, but, as she put it, "What can we do about *samsara*? We are born and have come this far, this much, so now they take that much back again." *Samsara*, the round of life, never ends, and all lives are unsatisfactory. In Buddhism, only one transformation is truly successful—the transformation leading to the experience of nirvana. Each unenlightened life, and death, is merely one more spin on the wheel of life.

In the world and religion of the Khmer, all that is given is taken away. All that is given is understood simultaneously as coming from our ancestors and from our own past actions. Khmer pray to their ancestors, who have become powerful since departing from the lives they led with their children in the rice fields, and who pity their grandchildren. Khmer are also enjoined to extirpate and control the desires within them, including, in Cheata's case, the desire for enough food, the desire to live in a place she had a special claim to, or the desire for minimal respect. Unable to suppress her desires in degrees sufficient to please the new powers in the temple, she was forced out into the world. In addition to meaning "world," *lok* means monk; like the girls from the *"Kaun Lok"* story, Cheata has finished with her state of dependency as a child of monks.

IMAGINARY ENDS

The conversations I have with the imaginary David about such stories and themes continue. Some of the insights I have gained from them I have offered here as a means of paying part of my debt to an "other mother" of my own. Such stories never conclude, a fact that highlights the creative power of the interaction of the individual and social imaginaries.

I would like to stress a few final points; first, speaking of hierarchy and orderliness in "Songs," Chandler remarked that

> ... what pulls Cambodians into concerted action is the fear that upper ranks in the society, which defined the others, had been eliminated by unbelievers and that, therefore, Cambodia—as a set of hierarchical arrangements—"would no longer exist." Being "wild" meant having no one to respect, or to look down on; orderliness had been destroyed by foreigners, and violence, perhaps, was at last permissible to restore it.[55]

Patrons do indeed claim to define the ontologies of those who rely on them, and being wild does imply a lack of hierarchy and Khmer morality. However, although a shared vision exists, the elements do not always remain in the same relationship to each other. Chandler's last sentence above seems to say that, for Cambodians, becoming "wild"—existing without the ordered and hierarchical world of civilized relationships—creates a desire to restore civilization. But that is not what the girls in the *"Kaun Lok"* story wish to do. Sokh does appear to thrive within Khmer civilization, but his desire is set in opposition to the world of violence. Grandmother Cheata wanted to remain in the Buddhist temple she had rescued from the jungle,

[55] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 92.

but now saw no hope for personal improvement without the transformation of death, and even that promised precious little improvement.

Within the confines of the Cambodian cultural imagination, few alternatives to hierarchy and dependency are advanced. Nevertheless, we should remain careful not to overemphasize the degree to which all Cambodians desire a person, a patron, to respect. Some may indeed desire a person to despise—Hansen's essay in this volume cites a humorous story from the *Kotelok* in which a poor man, lost in a fantasy of a better life, causes himself to fall into danger at precisely the moment when he imagines having risen to a level where he has a servant to kick. If we consider personal dependency, however, it appears that Cambodians mostly desire a patron on whom they can depend. There are always fears that one will have to constantly *dak khluon*, or humble oneself, in a hierarchical relationship. In fact, those performing such acts of humility are engaged in such rigid self-discipline that it can seem shocking when they are encouraged to further *kham moat sângkat chett*—grit their teeth and oppress their hearts. In these situations, the myth of a modest and egalitarian existence represents abundance when contrasted with a life dominated by rice and dependency.

I would like to return briefly to my earlier discussion of *nissay*, which I translated as both "fate" and "dependency," so as to amend it slightly by addition of a third possible form of *nissay*. In attempting to demonstrate the link between the two, and their mutual relationship to hierarchy, I focused earlier on the types of *nissay* one can request from another person. The enactment of a cultural relationship in these terms means specifically to occupy an instituted type of relationship, which exists in the imaginary. When one becomes part of that relationship, all sorts of behaviors and expectations become much clearer.

I would like to add the observation that there exists a different way of conceptualizing *nissay* that does not posit the extreme hierarchies we have already seen. In many especially friendly conversations during fieldwork, I was told by my new friends that "we must have a *nissay* together!" This is undoubtedly due in part to my tendency to meet elderly people in religious settings, giving religious and cosmological thinking more relevance than they might elsewhere.

There was in the acceptance of these relationships no explicit formalization of authority or dependency; the emphasis was on fate as a form of unknowable destiny. This destiny would have had to come from past lives in which we had been close, and which affected each other's karmic destinies. This is a common trope in Buddhist literature, especially that of the most popular *jataka* type: people will be reborn together over and over again until the karmic debts they owe each other are exhausted.

In these relationships, certainly one of us may have "owed" the other a karmic debt, but without access to the Buddha's own ability to review our past lives and untangle the skein of karma and its fruits, we could never know who it was that ought to be "on top." All we knew was that we were entangled in each other's lives for a purpose, and that we stood an even chance of doing something meritorious for each other that would advance our mutual progress towards nirvana.

Precisely because we cannot know which partner has the karmic superiority, this type of mutual *nissay* is non-hierarchical, at least until we start to form opinions for ourselves about exactly why we ended up in this relationship, should we start to regret it. We are mutually dependent on a mysterious past, which is hidden and unknown. We can share dependency on a similar source of nourishment, physical or

psychological, and find ourselves in a sibling relationship, as "older" and "younger" siblings (*bong b'aun*) of the same mother. A degree of hierarchy remains, but it is significantly less than that of generationally defined hierarchies, and when Khmer want to praise a relationship's relative equality, they will often say it is like "a normal sibling relationship" (*bâng-b'aun thommatha*). Moreover, precisely because our relationship to our "mother" is unknown in a metaphorical sibling relationship of this kind, we are not able to compete with our siblings for that mother's affection or favor.

A *nissay* we share represents a hidden counterpower, an "other mother," which may be nothing more than a modest self-sufficiency in which we receive neither food nor beatings from our mothers, but in which the wealth we create is not eaten by them, either. Our mutual *nissay* is hidden, but shapes our futures and our ability to act together. The mysterious nature of such mutual dependency prevents us from having to grit our teeth and oppress our hearts in our relations together. Hidden mothers occulted by death in the forests give birth to the possibility of relative independence and equality, without severing the links that bind people together emotionally; these mothers give without receiving. Like the tree spirit in the *"Kaun Lok"* story, and similar to Cheata's Renakse patron in the early years, such mothers are invisible and unacknowledged by their new children, who act as if they are truly self-sufficient.

"Songs," and Chandler's work more generally, has commonly evinced an imaginative empathy for the Cambodian cultural realm that has provided new insights that continue to nourish others, including myself. My imaginary conversations with David have been the basis for much of this particular investigation. As I mentioned in the beginning of this essay, I began to realize at some point that this paper was not entirely my own. But perhaps such efforts never are.

Once we've chosen to view stories like the story of Sokh, the *"Kaun Lok"* birds, or the testimony of Cheata as rhetorical performances, we are suddenly faced with narrators embedded in history and endowed with a great deal of agency. Nodes in a network contextualized by history and human agency, these storytellers, like students imagining ways to represent cultural realities, are themselves weavers of worlds. The symbols they employ speak to the understanding of the world they want us to share. When they discuss multiple worlds, at some point, we make choices between them; their stories can articulate threat as well as promise independent creation.

Which potentiality is brought to the fore may be largely a matter of historical context. For a post-war nineteenth-century Cambodia, in which elites were emerging from under the wreckage of wars visited on Cambodia by non-Khmer kings, these stories may have been both a way of mourning recent losses while reminding emergent patrons that their children were not to be abused or neglected.

When Chandler first retold the *"Kaun Lok"* story in 1978, Cambodia was, unknown to him, suffering from a nightmare brought about through the state-forced intensification of agriculture, an attempt to achieve the opposite of wildness. When we discuss it in 2008, we can imagine what it might mean in a land where enormous amounts of aid flow into the country, but benefit only a tiny elite, those Eduardo Galéano once called "our dominating classes—dominating inwardly, dominated

from outside."[56] But regardless of the eventual actions we take and which course society follows, the work of the imagination continues, and is as multiple in its individual dimensions as it is communal in the cultural. Multiple factors help constrain the possibilities of transforming imagination into reality. Most powerful among those factors are physical and economic violence, and culture. No theory of the imaginary can afford to neglect paying attention to such constraints on real life, and to real people's constant attempts to escape or reject those constraints.

Still, if the work of the imagination is at least partly the work of students in institutions, changes to the institutional imaginary have the potential to create new possibilities. Among students of a shared subject in what is fuzzily termed "the academy," the best process seems to be respectful and empathetic conversation and engagement with each other's imaginings, in which we argue over the details, but come to share basic conclusions on which we continue to depend. This is a process that literally defines the history of any field of study, and it is made possible only when a community already exists.

Reality is singular, and what decides the eventual singularity of our shared reality depends a great deal on the sense of community we have with each other, and the extent to which we are able to reach consensus. I have heard other of Chandler's students, both the children of his matriline and those who never formally requested *nissay* from him, discuss Chandler's contributions, and then add that an important characteristic is that he has generously and imaginatively helped create and hold together a community of students. Without such a community, our own imaginations falter, and the things we imagine melt away, like salt in water.[57]

At one point in "Songs," Chandler translates *keut knea* as "to ponder together." He says,

> The phrase "pondered together" [*keut knea*] in the presage should not suggest democratic procedures so much as a community of interest and a sense of oppression shared between "high" and "low" members of society, especially at this time.[58]

My analysis of these stories indicates that a sense of shared oppression may also divide high and low members of society. It suggests that those who are able to ponder conditions together with success already share a community of interest, and stand on the accomplishments of good mothers. These communities must be appropriately tended and maintained.

Perhaps that's what a community—such as the one Chandler, with his generous spirit, has helped create—is for: to "ponder together" with a commonality of interest, imagining, creating, and sustaining something that is completely new, but rooted in a shared history.

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[56] Eduardo Galéano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, [1973] 1997), p. 3.

[57] This metaphor comes to me from David Graeber's beautiful essay on memory and slavery. See David Graeber, "Painful Memories," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27,4 (1997): 374–400.

[58] Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," p. 92.

As I write this, in the last week of my fieldwork in Cambodia, just outside my window a *Pithi Châmroaen Ayu*, a "Life-increasing Ceremony," is coming to an end. Monks have bathed an old woman in water, and she has changed her clothing, discarding the old for the new, indicating the transformation and renewed strength the ceremony hopes to give her. Now near an end, an *achar* is singing a hymn in praise of mothers, whose lives have nourished our own, and whose being precedes our own.

CONTRIBUTORS

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